Weird Tales

FEB.

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

Robert E. Howard
Frank Owen
Paul Ernst
C. L. Moore

Coils of the Silver Serpent

a vivid weird story of a thousand eery thrills
by FORBES PARKHILL

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Coils of the Silver Serpent

By FORBES PARKHILL

A horrifying terror-tale of a gigantic anaconda and a murderous biologist—a story of a thousand thrills

1. *Trail of Terror*

UTTER terror was in the muffled shriek that arose from the penthouse. A man's scream. Blood-chilling. The despairing, horror-laden cry of one face to face with an appalling, frightful death.

It brought Patrolman Barry McClave bounding into action. He had been crouching, his ear at the keyhole of the door opening upon the roof from the stairway leading from the floor below—the last elevator stop.

Barry snapped erect. He spat on his hands, and his blue eyes sparkled with eagerness for battle as he whipped forth his automatic. He yanked the door open. Through the darkness he dashed across the roof of the twenty-eight story apartment building, toward the penthouse. Excitement and exertion sent the blood pounding through his veins. His florid face became beet-red. He cried:

"Man, oh man! What a break! And me little more'n a rookie! What'll Adell say when she hears——"

The blood-curdling scream cut him short. Without changing his grip on the weapon, he hammered on the penthouse door with the butt of the automatic.

"Open up, there! It's the law! Open up, you——"

The knob turned under his left hand. The door was unlocked. He kicked it open. That fearful, harrowing shriek burst upon him with piercing intensity.

He plunged forward. He failed to see the little, brown, monkey-like man behind the door, for his attention was fixed upon the figure dead ahead. A man; a man in evening clothes; a man with a pointed Vandyke beard; a short man, pot-bellied; a man wearing high, Cuban heels.

Oddly, it was the high heels that impressed Barry as he burst through the door. For the man had been facing the library on the left of the reception hall, and merely turned his head as Barry lunged in.

The young patrolman yelled:

"Where is Mr. Trehearne? Man, what are you doing to——"

And then his question was answered, not by the short man with the high heels, but by Salisbury Trehearne himself. Trehearne, the wealthy, elderly broker who lived alone in an apartment on the eighteenth floor—whose uneasy look and whose half-expressed feeling of dread had led the officer on the beat to follow him here to the penthouse apartment of Doctor Cloxton Vroom, the zoologist.

Trehearne came staggering backward through the library door. Coiled about him from knees to shoulders was a gigantic, silver serpent, an immense, thirty-foot anaconda, giant among reptiles! Its scaly hide was a leprous silver, glowing with faint phosphorescence.

"The giant snake was almost on his heels as he reached the corner."

One of Trehearne's arms was pinned against his side by the gigantic serpent's coils. With the other he pounded, clawed and scratched at the armor-like scales of the monster.

Never had Barry seen such an expression of stark terror on a man's face. Every vestige of color was drained from his cheeks. His eyes seemed about to burst from their sockets—whether from horror or pressure, Barry could not tell. His head was thrown far back. His mouth was open wide. From his throat came that heart-sickening shriek—weaker now than a moment since.

For an instant Barry was paralyzed with astonishment. An involuntary chill coursed up his spine. A musty, sickening odor pervaded the apartment.

"Help!" shrieked Trehearne hoarsely. "For God's sake, help me!"

The screaming plea brought Barry back to his senses. He raised his automatic.

Doctor Cloxton Vroom, the pot-bellied zoologist in the high heels, was gloating.

His eyes, so pale they were almost colorless, were opened wide. Thin lips were drawn back from white teeth. Oddly enough, despite his pot-paunch, Vroom's cheeks were sunken, almost haggard. He spat:

"So! Trehearne, you played for time —too long!"

Vroom was unarmed. At the moment, he seemed in the grip of some sort of hypnosis, for he evidenced no fear of the officer or his weapon.

Barry trained his pistol on the squirming, twisting, silvery folds of the monster reptile. But the instant he was ready to fire, the serpent had twisted with its prey. The steel-jacketed bullet would have pierced Trehearne's body, as well as the serpent's.

Barry dared not fire. The silvery anaconda's head was arched, weaving back and forth in front of Trehearne's eyes. Barry saw its powerful folds constrict.

An explosive gasp came from Trehearne's mouth as the last bit of breath was squeezed from his lungs. Barry heard two or three short, sharp little reports, as of twigs snapping. He knew it was the bones of Trehearne's pinioned arm, and perhaps his ribs, breaking under the terrific pressure.

Suddenly Trehearne went limp. His jaw sagged, his head fell lolling back. His free arm dangled loose. His knees buckled. Serpent and man plopped to the floor.

Barry whirled on the zoologist.

"You—you devil!" he exploded. "Get that—that thing off of Trehearne—man, do you hear me?—before I kill you!"

He leveled his automatic. From the corner of his eye he could see the jaws of the monstrous silver serpent distending—distending tremendously. He had read that such reptiles could swallow an ox easily. He shuddered. Was this fearful reptile about to——

Cloxton Vroom went white. He leaped sidewise, behind a huge, Indian pottery vase. His colorless eyes shot past Barry. They rested upon the little, brown, monkey-like man behind the door.

"Cariaco!" he bleated appealingly. "Kill him, Cariaco!"

The little monkey-man snatched a machete from the wall. He bounded toward Barry like a spider-monkey leaping from tree to tree.

Barry whirled, just as the machete descended. Primal instinct led him to throw up his arm to protect himself, rather than to send a bullet into the little brown man.

Cariaco's arm glanced off the patrolman's. Instead of the edge, the flat of the blade descended glancingly, shearing away Barry's cap and striking him upon the skull.

The pistol dropped from his fingers. He pitched forward upon the thick carpet. He was still semi-conscious, but the blow from the machete had sapped his strength. Through the ringing in his ears he could hear Vroom saying:

"So! It is well, Cariaco! . . . Tie him up, so! Swiftly, swiftly, Cariaco, while I drive this beast back to its cage!"

Barry was conscious that the little monkey-like brown man was lashing his ankles and wrists. He tried to struggle, but his sinews refused to respond to the lash of his will. He was dazed, partly unconscious, and incapable of protecting himself.

He could hear the tap of Vroom's high heels as the pot-bellied zoologist sped into the library. And then, a moment later, shouts and stamping.

"Back! . . . Away, you demon from hell! . . . Back to your cage, you silver rascal! . . . So! You would, would you? Take that!"

Barry's brain was beginning to clear. He opened his eyes. He was on his back. On a stand just above him he saw a de-

canter. He longed for a stiff swig from the decanter. His lips were fearfully dry. He rolled his head sidewise.

There, on the floor, lay a shapeless thing, a formless something, within the clothing of a man—Trehearne's clothing. The trunk was elongated. Barry blinked. But it had Trehearne's head.

Barry's stomach suddenly went cold and roily. He rolled his head to the other side. There was Vroom, stamping his high heels and shouting, as he drove the gigantic silver serpent back from its prey. The reptile was weaving and darting. Vroom lunged and struck at it with a red-hot poker.

"Back!" he shouted, and stamped. "Back, I tell you!"

BARRY saw the immense serpent swing swiftly sidewise. With a movement almost as swift as lightning, its blunt head shot past the stamping zoologist. Its scaly body slithered and scraped across the floor.

"So!" croaked Vroom savagely. "So! You want your supper, eh? . . . Take that! . . . I'll show you who's master here! . . . So!"

The glowing poker slashed through the air. It swished across the serpent's thick body, some six feet below its head.

A little curl of blue smoke arose from the scaly, silver form. Instantly the serpent was transformed into a thrashing, writhing mass. A sickening odor of burning flesh became perceptible.

Barry gazed, fascinated.

The writhing, tortured serpent twisted itself into a knot. But when, an instant later, it uncoiled, it was farther back, away from Vroom. It reared its head high, always facing the man with the glowing poker. And Barry could see, alongside the searing mark of the red-hot iron, a dozen other similar, but older scars.

Vroom shouted, "Back!" and stamped again. Barry wondered why he stamped. He was unaware that the tympanum is lacking in a serpent's ear—that it cannot hear, but that it is sensitive to the vibrations produced by stamping.

For a moment man and snake battled, like two fencers, but always the serpent was losing ground. Thrice Vroom lunged at the reptile with the glowing iron. Thrice the monster evaded the thrust with the swiftness of lightning. Then the two vanished through the library door.

Abruptly Barry was conscious that every muscle in his body was taut. As he realized the significance of the zoologist's battle with the reptile—that the man was driving it back to prevent it from devouring Trehearne's body, from swallowing it whole—he was gripped by a sudden nausea.

Things began to swim again before his eyes. He closed his lids. The last thing he saw was Cariaco, the little brown monkey-man. Cariaco was eyeing him speculatively and testing the edge of his machete with his thumb.

The next thing he heard was Vroom's croaking voice:

"So! You did well, Cariaco. . . . What? No, no, my boy—put that machete down! Do not kill him, unless he tries to escape!"

Barry took a deep breath. He opened his eyes. As loudly as he could, he bellowed, three times:

"Help!"

Vroom smiled, and fingered his pointed Vandyke.

"So? . . . And who will hear you, my dear officer? . . . Twenty-eight stories up, you must remember. And sound does not go down easily. Roar all you please. And then, tell me how you came to be in wait at my door!"

Barry swallowed.

"Go to hell!" he snapped.

2. Twenty-Eight Floors Up

"So?" Vroom was playing with his pointed beard. "Tough, eh? I—and my pet—can make the hardest turn gentle. Ask Cariaco."

Barry shuddered. But he was not to be bluffed. He hadn't been on the force long. But he knew the fear inspired by the shield he wore, and his uniform. He knew better than to let himself be placed on the defensive. So long as he represented the law, he must for ever take the aggressive, carry the battle to the other fellow, never admit he was licked. Hard to do, when one was bound hand and foot, but not wholly impossible.

"Man, why did you murder Trehearne?" he demanded commandingly.

"Murder?"

Vroom's voice sounded now like a cat's purr.

"Murder? My dear officer—you witnessed it yourself. The serpent killed Trehearne, not I!"

"You made no move to halt it!" Barry burst out impetuously, and shuddered. "You could have saved him, man. And you didn't!"

Vroom shrugged.

"Opinion, my dear officer—merely a matter of your opinion. Cariaco and I will swear we did our utmost to save my dear friend and patron, Salisbury Trehearne."

"Man alive!" Barry gave a noticeable start. "Now I remember. I read it in the papers. He was going to finance your expedition to Samarkand or Timbuctoo or somewhere."

"To the headwaters of the Orinoco and Amazon," Vroom corrected with an evil grin; "whence came our silvery pet, who so unfortunately escaped from his cage just now. So. You know a lot for an ordinary police officer—perhaps too much."

"I know Trehearne left you a half-million dollars in his will, to finance future expeditions!" Barry burst forth impetuously. "I read it in the papers."

The zoologist fingered his Vandyke beard. His colorless eyes narrowed to mere slits as he gazed speculatively at his prisoner.

"Too much," he mused. "You know too much, my friend—too much!"

He turned to the little monkey-like servant. "The doors, Cariaco. See that none of this policeman's companions are outside. So!"

Cariaco bobbed like a jumping-jack. *"Si, si, Jefe!"*

"A marvelous servant, Cariaco," said Vroom. "Always does as he is told. Never talks too much. In fact, it was from him I first procured the secret of the silver serpent. A full-blooded Oñote Indian, is Cariaco, though they say the race is extinct."

Barry was straining at his bonds. They would not give an inch. He was in a tough spot, and he knew it. He decided his best course was to stall for time. Thing to do was to keep this pot-bellied little fiend in evening clothes talking until—well, until something happened.

"The secret of the silver serpent?" he prompted.

Vroom pursed his lips, frowned, fingered his pointed beard.

"'Twill do no harm," he muttered, to himself. "Because, within half an hour——"

He chopped off his sentence suddenly, and began another.

"I am a zoologist. You know what is a zoologist?"

"Sure. A guy that works for the zoo."

Vroom smiled. "So? Sometimes, yes. I was on an expedition to the interior of Venezuela when I met Cariaco. I was seeking some specimens of the huge anaconda, among other reptilia, and——"

Barry interrupted. "I thought they were kind of green, or something."

"In their wild state, yes—with a double row of large, oval, black spots on the back. But this—my pet—has lived for three years inside a trunk, my friend. In darkness. Bleached out. You see, he eats a—well, let us say, a meal—and then he sleeps six months until he is hungry again."

Barry shuddered. "You were talking about Cariaco."

"So! To be sure. The other natives told me there was just one man who could always catch the giant devil-snake —Cariaco. He possessed magic power over the reptiles, they said. They even devoured all his enemies, if he commanded."

"Hooey!" snorted Barry.

"Not hooey," insisted Vroom. "I found it was the truth. Not magic, but a rare potion he carried in an Indian vial of clay. A potion that has an effect upon these huge anaconda much like catnip has upon the cat family. It attracts them powerfully and, unless they are already gorged, stimulates their appetite tremendously."

"Oh, yeah?" demanded Barry sarcastically.

"Cariaco would place some of the substance upon a lamb. The lamb would be staked a short distance from the water's edge, as bait. The anaconda would be attracted. When he had swallowed the lamb he would become sluggish, and unable to move quickly. The natives would pounce upon him with lassoes—so!"

"Well, what of it?" Barry was prodding him on, stalling for time.

"Only this, my friend. Cariaco used it also to rid himself of his enemies. He would place some of the substance upon the clothing of the enemy. The odor is almost indistinguishable to a human being. The first time the enemy approached the water's edge, at night—pouf! He vanished! So!"

"That musty, sickening odor I noticed when I first came in?" asked Barry, and Vroom nodded and went on:

" 'Twas the truth. I know. My companion on the expedition, a surly fellow, immensely rich, who was financing the trip, carried a huge amount of cash, but would spend none of it. I grew to hate him. So I anointed his clothing with Cariaco's snake potion. That night Rutherford Giblin went down to the water's edge—and never came back!"

BARRY cried out in horror at Vroom's calm recital. "You—you murdered him? Man, you mean to say, you let him be devoured by a snake?"

Vroom smiled. He was immensely pleased with himself.

"My knowledge opened up a whole world of pleasing possibilities, my friend. I brought Cariaco and a living specimen of the anaconda back with me on my yacht."

"Your yacht?"

"I forgot to tell you, my friend. I bought the yacht with the money Giblin should have spent, but didn't. But it takes money to support a yacht. A year later I was nearing the end of my resources. I cultivated the acquaintance of Jakob Pfrimmer, the wealthy old——"

Barry interrupted. "I know. The rich old jewel merchant, who disappeared a year ago, with a hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds. Man, oh man, what I'd give to work on a case like that!"

Vroom fingered his beard and sighed.

"After all, a hundred thousand dollars doesn't go very far when one has a yacht like mine to support. Have you seen it, down at pier number——"

Barry interrupted with a cry of horror.

"You fiend! You placed that ointment on his clothing, so your ghastly silver

snake would crush him—eat him alive!"

"I assure you," said Vroom seriously, "that Pfrimmer was quite crushed to death before the serpent swallowed him. A convenient way of doing away with a person—no? Guns, knives, poisons—they all leave embarrassing traces. But my serpent murders—they destroy the victim without leaving a trace. Swallow the corpus delicti, as it were. Clever. No?"

Barry gritted his teeth as he strove to control himself.

"You admit it! You murdered Jakob Pfrimmer! Just like you murdered Salisbury Trehearne just now! . . . Cloxton Vroom, I place you under arrest for murder!"

Vroom smiled faintly as he regarded Barry's bonds significantly. He was toying with the policeman's captured automatic.

"So? I'm under arrest; *you're* telling *me!* You, unarmed, bound, helpless, place *me* under arrest!"

He broke into a harsh, grating laugh.

"Man, I'm not speaking for myself," glowered Barry. "I'm representing the law." He decided upon a desperate bluff. "This place is surrounded. There is an officer at every door. You haven't a chance, Vroom, you——"

The zoologist clapped his hands. Cariaco popped out of a door like a monkey on a stick. Vroom looked at him questioningly, brows lifted.

"No, no, *mi Jefe.*" The little brown man shook his head. "No policemans."

Vroom smirked, plucked his beard, and glanced at Barry with a sidewise glance, mockingly.

"Why lie, my friend? Why not tell the truth, for a change? If you know what is best for you, you will tell me how you came to be at my door, just now. . . . Talk!"

Barry talked.

"Man, I'm talking true," he said. "Trehearne passed me on the street down below, while I was walking my beat. Seemed worried about something. Asked me what I knew about you. Told me he was going up to your penthouse. Asked me how quick I could answer an emergency call on my beat."

Vroom scowled fiercely.

"So! And you——?"

"I asked him if he needed help. He said no, but that I might stand by. After he'd gone I got to thinking about what he said, and everything. Figured maybe I oughta tail him, and find out what was what. If everything was okay, he needn't know. If it wasn't . . . Well, I was at the door when I heard him yell. That's all."

The zoologist's lip curled in a crooked snarl. But he said nothing. It was Barry who spoke.

"No, that isn't all. I just remembered something. Something you forgot. Man, you didn't tell me why you drove the silver serpent away after it had crushed Trehearne to death."

He was mystified by the enigmatic smile of his pot-bellied captor.

"Perhaps," purred Vroom, like a cat playing with a mouse, "it was because I forgot."

"I don't get you." Barry frowned. "But I do know this, fella: it was the foolest stunt you ever pulled in your life! If the snake had swallowed Trehearne's body, there would have been nothing left to fasten the crime on you. You said it yourself—the serpent swallowed the corpuscle delicious, or whatever it is. How'll you explain Trehearne's body, found here in your apartment?"

"Perhaps," Vroom smiled, "it will not be found in my apartment. But—no matter. . . . Cariaco!"

"Si, si, mi Jefe!" answered the native, bounding forward, monkey-like.

"The vial, Cariaco!"

"*Si, si, mi Jefe.* Here it is."

Vroom took from the servant's hand a squat, bulbous clay vial, marked with Indian characters in black and yellow. He held it aloft, as if it might have been a slender wine-glass. He withdrew the stopper. He sniffed. The apartment was filled with the musty, faintly sickening odor Barry had noticed at first.

The zoologist stepped to Barry's side. He tipped the vial. Drop by drop a murky green liquid fell upon Barry's uniform. A chill of terror coursed through his veins. Screaming words burst from pallid lips.

"Good Lord, man—what are you doing?"

Vroom smirked. "Now you see why I refused to let the serpent devour Trehearne. I dare not let you escape, my friend. I can dispose of Trehearne's body otherwise. But yours must be destroyed without a trace. By the serpent!"

3. *Without a Trace*

THEY don't make 'em any braver than Patrolman Barry McClave. Barry had swapped lead with the Baxter Street mob, and never batted an eyelash or gave an inch. But this was something else. It's easy enough to face death when you're standing on your two feet, slug-slinging with a foe whose bullet may blot you out, swift and sure—like that! But to face Trehearne's fate—to know that you're going to be slowly crushed to death in the slimy folds of a monstrous reptile; to know your bones will pop and snap and crumble beneath the constrictive power of the gigantic snake; to know you are fated to vanish slowly, head first down that gigantic maw—ah, buddy, if you can face that without the quiver of a lip, you're a man!

Barry didn't want to die. Life was sweet to him—awfully sweet. But in that terrible moment he knew that death, too, can be sweet—if only it is swift and certain!

His face, so recently flushed and florid, was sapped of its color. His lips were blue. He was on the verge of utter, unreasoning panic, when one forgets his manhood—everything!

It was the shield, glistening on the blue background of his uniform, that brought him around with clenched teeth. It would not let him forget he represented the Law. The Law doesn't squeal, doesn't whine. The men who wear that badge may die, but they die like men. They go down fighting. They know how to take it.

"I'll show 'em!" he muttered to himself. "If it's in the cards that this is to be the kind of an end I draw—well, I'll play 'em as they lay!"

For a moment he was on the verge of begging Vroom to send a bullet through his brain before he allowed the serpent to devour him. But he bit his lip to keep himself from begging. After all, the agony would last only a minute or so. He could stand it. He'd show 'em!

"Take it out, Cariaco. . . . So!"

Barry heard Vroom's voice as from a distance. The pot-bellied creature in the evening clothes was motioning toward Trehearne's crushed body with Barry's pistol.

The little brown man tugged at the shapeless form, but it was all he could do to move it. His master pocketed the pistol and laid hold of the body. Together they dragged it through the outer door.

With every atom of his strength Barry strained at his lashings. They did not give an inch. Barry knew, then, that he could never break them. He relaxed with a groan.

Was this to be the end, then? Was he to wait supinely until the repulsive

Vroom returned, to loose the monstrous serpent upon him? Was there nothing he could do?

Like an inspiration, it came to him—the solution of his difficulty. He rolled over, kicked and wriggled through the door of the library. Sure enough—there it was—the poker with which Vroom had driven the loathsome reptile back to its cage. It was thrust back into the glowing grate fire, heating anew.

Barry rolled over, and kicked at it with his bound feet. It fell out upon the hearth, the tip glowing red. He flopped over upon it, backward, so that the ropes would fall across the red-hot tip.

He flinched as the searing metal touched his flesh. But an instant later he felt the ropes fall apart. He flung himself sidewise, his arms free at last.

A moment more, and he had loosed the bonds on his ankles. He staggered to his feet, his nerves aquiver. For an instant he stood, dully looking at the seared flesh where the poker had touched his wrist. He was conscious that his hand was trembling violently.

He stumbled through the library door, hunting for a weapon. Vroom had his automatic, and Cariaco had taken the machete.

"Man, oh man!" he exclaimed, the nervous reaction causing his voice to tremble, "I'm so shaky I couldn't shoot a gat straight if I had one! If I only had a good shot of——"

He broke off as his eyes fell on the decanter. He up-ended it and swallowed gulp after gulp of the fiery liquor. Then he broke for the door.

"Man, I haven't the chance of a fiddler's witch if they catch me here unarmed." He opened the door cautiously, saw no one, and dashed across the dark expanse to the door opening from the stairway. "I'd be nerts to stick around and try to fight it out with 'em, and maybe get burned down. If I can lock this door from the other side, they can't possibly get away before I can call the station."

But the door wouldn't lock from the staircase side. Barry, whose head was beginning to ring from the effects of the liquor, felt he could guard the elevators downstairs in the lobby and prevent their escape while he was summoning help.

Then the liquor got a good grip on him, and for some minutes life seemed a succession of flashes, like scenes on a movie screen, with dark intervals between.

He didn't remember going down in the elevator. But the flash registered as he leaned over the switchboard and hoarsely barked at Adell Denby:

"Headquarters, 'Dell — quick! Riot squad—hommy squad—everything they got!"

Adell Denby was blond and a knockout for looks, and she was Barry's sweetie and the swellest skirt there was.

"Barry! . . . What's the matter, pal? You look awful, Barry—like you just seen a ghost, or something! My shift's done in twenty minutes—midnight. Let me take you——"

And then the shrieking of a police siren. And the next flash found Barry out in the street, running toward the excited group clustered near the curb.

There was the emergency ambulance. Two attendants in white jackets, stooping over something on the asphalt. The milling crowd made way before Barry's uniform. He saw the attendants lifting something onto the stretcher. Something inert and shapeless. Something dressed in Salisbury Trehearne's clothing!

"D' gent took a dive," a spectator was explaining to another. "Out d' window,

see? Another case of losin' his shirt in the Street, huh?"

The explanation was seeping through Barry's consciousness.

"They threw Trehearne's body over the coping," he was telling himself, as if explaining to someone else. "Everybody will think his bones were broken by the twenty-eight story fall, instead of by the serpent!

"Man, I get it, now. I see why Vroom was willing to drive the serpent away from Trehearne's body. He knew he could dispose of the body so it would look like an accident—or a suicide leap. But he can't get away with it. Not after I tell my story."

Again the siren shrieking in his ears; the siren of the homicide squad, responding to Barry's summons, 'phoned to headquarters by Adell. A peremptory voice ringing in his ears:

"You're the officer on the beat? What happened?"

It was Jody Sparlin's voice. Sparlin, head of the hommy squad. Sparlin, the slickest dick in the city. Sparlin, who had solved half the city's murders in the last five years. Sparlin, whose exploits made the first pages right along. Barry recognized him. But to Sparlin, Barry was just another harness bull—just the flatfoot on the beat.

"Murder, sir!" Barry responded thickly, saluting. "They tossed him from the roof. C'mon—we can get 'em!"

Sparlin reached under his shoulder for his gun.

"All right, boys. Let's go!" he snapped at his aides.

A dark interval as they went up the elevator. Barry didn't even know when they dropped a detective at the floor where Trehearne had lived. The next flash—they were at the door leading to the roof.

"Man, don't take any chances!" Barry was warning. "I know Vroom's armed. He's got my automatic. The monkey-man has a big knife. They're both desperate."

And then the rush across the roof in the darkness. And Cloxton Vroom, suave, cool, courteous, unflurried, meeting them at the door of the penthouse apartment—and inviting them in to enjoy his hospitality.

"I don't get the lay," Sparlin was barking angrily. "Speak up, Officer! Just what happened?"

Barry remembered trying to tell his fantastic, unbelievable story. Words rushing out, tumbling over each other in his eagerness to explain; words that tripped and stumbled and slid away incoherently as a result of the terrific nerve-strain he had endured, and the tremendous jolt he had taken from the decanter.

"Giant snake—crushed Trehearne to death—threw him over coping—captured me—going to make snake eat me up—that fiend—high heels—ugh!"

The boss of the hommy squad was looking at the young harness cop suspiciously.

"Doctor Vroom—will you please tell us what happened here? The officer seems a little bit—er, excited."

VROOM smiled faintly, and plucked at his immaculate Vandyke.

"Assuredly! . . . The young officer came here to notify me my Rolls had been parked too long, down below. I offered him a drink, and explained I was planning to drive it down to the pier to my yacht in a few minutes. A roadster, you know. I drive myself.

"So! I explained to him that I am a zoologist, about to embark on another trip. He hinted about the liquor in the decanter, and I, of course, gave him another drink. I am afraid I talked too long on the subject dear to my heart, and he kept helping himself to the decanter.

"He wished to see some of my specimens. I started to show him the stuffed reptiles in the case in the other room. And then he seemed to lose his head, entirely. Must have had a good many drinks before he came here. An attack of delirium, perhaps.

"He whipped out his pistol, and was going to shoot one of my prized stuffed snakes. I called Cariaco, my man, who took the weapon away from him. He stumbled down the stairs, muttering threats against me. A most pitiful case, for an officer so young and so promising."

Sparlin glared at Barry. The detective who had been dropped off at the eighteenth floor reported, saluting.

"I examined Trehearne's apartment, sir. Found an open window just above the spot where the ambulance picked up his body."

Barry was frantic as he saw Vroom wriggling out of the trap.

"He had the little monkey-man open that window—Vroom did!"

Vroom smiled indulgently, and winked at Sparlin. "The young officer ran downstairs, found the crowd gathered about the body of the suicide, Trehearne, and thought he could get even with me by blaming it upon me. . . . I wish you'd look through my apartment, to make certain there is no living serpent here—nothing but stuffed specimens!"

Sparlin grunted.

"I'll have a man look the place over. Matter of form, Doctor. . . . Officer, let me smell your breath. . . . Whew! Like a distillery!"

"But it's true!" Barry protested vehemently. "The silver serpent—tried to eat Trehearne—the monkey-man——"

"Listen, buddy." Sparlin was frowning. "You ought to have more sense than to get snozzled while you're in uniform. It'll get you busted, flat, if I turn you in to the inspector. I got a notion to do it, too, only you're a youngster on the force. . . . Snakes, big enough to eat people up! Monkey-men! Buddy, you got the d. t's. You better go home and sober up."

4. *Sinister House*

BARRY didn't remember how he got back downstairs. It was another lapse, a dark interval between his flashes of consciousness. He only knew that Sparlin and the homicide squad had gone, convinced that Trehearne was a suicide who had leaped from his own window, and that the officer on the beat was drunk.

Barry didn't blame them. His story was so wildly fantastic that he could scarce expect anyone to believe it. The disturbing thought crept into his mind that perhaps that drink from the decanter had inflamed his imagination.

"Maybe—maybe Vroom was right," he muttered to himself. "Maybe I had a few drinks too many, and just imagined all that stuff about the silver serpent crushing Trehearne to death. . . . Man, oh man, I swear I'll never touch anything stronger than 3.2 as long as I live!"

The clock in the crowded lobby showed 11.56 o'clock. Which reminded Barry that Adell's trick at the switchboard was finished at midnight. He straightened his uniform, and felt of his holster. Vroom had returned his automatic to Sparlin, who had given it back to Barry reluctantly.

He started for the switchboard. He wasn't going to mention all that snake stuff to Adell. Catch him making a fool of himself again!

A dart of pain stabbed through his wrist. His eyes fell upon the long welt, searing the flesh. For a long moment he stared.

Then he cried out:

"Man alive! Imagination didn't put that burn there!"

He rushed over to the switchboard. His brain was clearing, now.

"Adell! Has Cloxton Vroom or his little monkey-man left the apartment yet?"

"I don't know, Barry. All I know is that Vroom 'phoned, just before the detectives arrived, and asked that a porter be sent up to remove a trunk, which he wanted sent down to his yacht, at the pier. It ought to be at the service entrance now."

Barry blurted out: "The silver serpent!" and grabbed his girl friend by the wrist.

"Listen, 'Dell. This is important, baby! Say, did Trehearne put a call through the switchboard from his apartment just before he—before he jumped from the window?"

"No, Barry. But he did call from Vroom's penthouse apartment just about that time. Started to ask me something, and then said, 'Pardon me,' and hung up. Like he'd been starting to 'phone, and someone came in, and——"

"Man alive!" Barry didn't even stop to thank the girl. He darted back toward the service entrance.

Cloxton Vroom and Cariaco were superintending the loading of a large trunk on an express truck. Barry snapped:

"Look here, Vroom. I got the goods on you, now. I got positive evidence from an outsider that Trehearne was in your apartment a moment before his death."

"So?" Vroom smiled. "Another attack of delirium, no?"

"If you don't believe it, go and buzz the 'phone girl — the swell-looking blond!" challenged Barry. "It's enough to send you to the hot squat!"

Vroom plucked his beard. "Pardon. I will—just to make sure you're wrong."

He disappeared. Barry was positive the serpent was in the trunk. But guesswork gained no convictions. He wanted proof.

"Open it up, Cariaco," he told the servant.

"Caracoles!" exploded the little brown man. "You go jump in lake, hey?"

Barry ordered the truck-driver and the porter to hold up the loading of the truck. They were impressed by his uniform, but they knew he had no legal right to force the opening of Vroom's trunk. For several minutes they argued. Cariaco sputtered with rage. Barry was striving to keep his temper.

Barry lost the argument. The trucker and the porter started to lift the trunk to the tail-gate of the truck.

"You birds," scowled Barry, "wouldn't be so hot about handling that trunk if you knew it contained a thirty-foot snake!"

With a shriek the porter loosed his end of the trunk. It toppled from the truck to the street—and burst open.

Instantly Cariaco, with a scream of rage, whipped out a long knife and rushed at the officer.

Barry yanked out his automatic. He owed this monkey-man something — a steel-jacketed slug through the belly. And now was his chance. There were witnesses to prove he was shooting in self-defense.

"You asked for it, buddy!" he snapped, and pulled the trigger.

There was no report. In a flash Barry realized that Vroom must have unloaded the weapon before returning it.

The knife was slicing through the darkness. Barry sidestepped and he swung with his left, with all his might.

The knife slashed through his sleeve, through the flesh of his arm. But at the same instant his fist smashed home against the monkey-man's jaw like a blast of dynamite.

Barry tipped the scales at 180 pounds. The monkey-man could have weighed

little more than half as much. Something cracked when Barry's fist connected. Whether it was Cariaco's jawbone or his neck vertebræ, Barry couldn't tell. He saw the brown man spinning through the air. And then——

Then he became conscious of the terrorized shrieks of the truck-driver and the porter. He spun about. The ghastly, sinuous form of the gigantic silver serpent was emerging from the shattered trunk.

INSTINCTIVELY Barry raised his pistol—and then remembered it was empty. The enormous snake lunged suddenly at him. It paid no heed to the fleeing trucker and porter. And it flashed upon Barry why. Vroom had anointed his uniform with the contents of the vial when Barry had been held prisoner. The giant serpent, its appetite still unsatisfied, was making for him as it might have made for the lamb used for bait. He knew it would seek him as its prey above all others. He could feel the hair rising upon his head.

He leaped backward as the serpent writhed free of the splintered trunk. He turned, and sprang through the doorway, back into the lobby of the apartment hotel.

But the gigantic serpent was almost at his heels. Barry screamed out, "Look out!" and sped across the lobby as fast as terror could drive him.

Pandemonium broke loose in the crowded lobby as the monstrous silver serpent slithered across the tiled floor. Women screamed. Men shouted. Everyone broke from the path of the fleeing policeman, with the giant snake so close behind.

The reptile was moving at incredible speed, far faster than a man could run. It was within a yard of Barry as he dived through the revolving doors.

He heaved a great, gasping sigh of relief as he gained the sidewalk outside. His first thought was of Adell—Adell, inside, with the giant serpent.

He leaped to one side, where he could peer through a plate glass window. A glance showed him the switchboard was deserted.

"At least, she's safe!" he gasped.

The lobby had been cleared of people as if by magic. The huge serpent was back in the center of the lobby, its weaving head lifted high above its coiled body as it cast about for its vanished prey.

And then it saw Barry, through the window, and started for him. Barry turned and fled.

Doubtless the giant snake never knew the plate glass was between it and its prey. It struck the window at express-train speed. Its armored head burst through the glass like a battering-ram. Glass clattered to the sidewalk, and shattered to bits.

Barry was frantic with fear as he turned and sped toward the corner. He knew only too well what capture by the dreadful reptile meant. He could picture the serpent overtaking him, twining its crushing coils about him, devouring him in full view of thousands of helpless persons. His heart was pounding as if it were about to burst.

"I—I can't outrun it!" was the thought that flashed through his mind. "My only chance is to hop one of these autos!"

Around the corner ahead, a huge maroon-and-silver Rolls roadster was swinging, heading toward the pier. Barry saw it in a passing glance. It registered the thought that Vroom was escaping. But Barry wasted no thought upon him, then.

As the serpent burst into the street, a horrified scream went up. The after-theater traffic was fairly heavy. A wave of frightened pedestrians swept back in both directions on the sidewalk. Passing

motor traffic speeded up to the utmost.

Barry's best bet was to grab a passing car at the corner, in the cross traffic. Again the giant serpent was almost on his heels as he reached the corner.

A truck swung past—the same truck that had been loading at the service entrance when the appearance of the silver snake had sent the terrified driver into his cab and speeding away. Barry swung himself into the back of the truck. Panting, he shouted at the driver:

"Step on it, damn you! Drive like hell!"

The driver cast one terrified glance behind him. Then he stepped on it. He drove like hell.

THE truck swung around another car. The traffic light was against them. But by now traffic lights meant nothing to any of the motorists. Traffic was utterly demoralized. The sight of the gigantic serpent had thrown every person within eye-range into utter panic.

Cars were shooting through the red light. Two of them piled up in the center of the intersection. Their occupants leaped out and fled afoot, screaming.

Barry saw the truck was holding its own with the pursuing serpent. He knew that if they could once get in the open, where there was no impeding traffic, they could outrun it. But dead ahead a black sedan cut across their path.

The truck sideswiped the sedan, sheared off a fender, shoved it into the curb. The rear end skewed about sharply, and Barry was almost thrown to the pavement.

"Faster!" he shouted at the driver.

An earthquake could have caused little more commotion than the startling appearance of the monstrous silver serpent in the crowded city street. Panic gripped everyone who saw it.

The driver needed none of Barry's urging. Already he was driving like a madman.

Turning the corner ahead, Barry again saw the big maroon-and-silver roadster. But this time something arrested his eye. Beside Vroom, who was driving, sat—Adell Denby!

Barry gasped. His sweetheart—with Vroom, the murderer!

The explanation flashed upon him suddenly. He cursed himself for his stupidity. For he, himself, had led Adell into what doubtless was a death trap! Hadn't he boasted to Vroom that he had the goods on him? That the 'phone operator's testimony was enough to send him to the chair?

He groaned. "He checked up, and found it was the truth—and I was dumb enough to let him go! He knew he must get rid of her—that her testimony meant his death! It was time for her to leave at midnight. He offered to take her home in his car. But instead of taking her home——

5. The Doom Ship

"HE'S going to seal her lips by—by killing her!" he gasped frantically.

Suddenly he turned his empty pistol on the truck-driver.

"Follow that roadster!" he rasped furiously.

The driver glanced over his shoulder. The serpent was falling behind. They were getting out of the congested traffic district now, heading down a dark side street, lined with warehouses; heading toward the river.

"Go to hell!" gasped the terrorized driver. Even the threat of the pistol muzzle could not swerve him from his course. Between the gun and the serpent, he'd take his chance with the former. "If you want to chase that car, hop out and chase it, Big Boy! Me, I'm going places—fast!"

He was. Now that he had a fairly open street, he floor-boarded the throttle pedal. The truck leaped forward. It was gaining on the speeding serpent at every turn of the wheels.

Barry was in a quandary. Vroom, the murderer, was taking away the girl he loved—taking her away to get rid of her, doubtless.

"But what can I do?" he groaned, helplessly. "If I jump out, it means the end of me if the—the devil-snake catches up with me! And that won't be helping her! Besides, I could never catch up with the roadster, afoot."

Ahead, a uniformed officer leaped out into the glow of a street light, signalling the speeding truck to stop. Barry recognized the patrolman, and tried to shout at him. But his voice was lost in the uproar as the truck shot past.

Barry heard a fusillade of pistol shots. The patrolman, doubtless startled almost out of his senses by the speeding, phosphorescent serpent gliding down the dark street at express-train speed, had opened fire. But to hit such a slender, moving mark requires an expert marksman, one whose aim is not shaken by fright.

As he watched, the speeding truck swerved. Barry, almost losing his balance, glanced ahead. To his horror he saw that the street ended at the river—that the truck was speeding far too fast to make the turn in safety.

The driver, driven mad by fear, realized the situation too late. He applied the brakes as he tried to turn. There could be but one result.

The truck crashed sidewise through the fence alongside the quay. The next instant it was spinning through space. Barry jumped.

He struck the water on his back, well away from the truck. The impact almost knocked the breath from his lungs. As he was pinwheeling through the air, he remembered that Vroom had indicated that the anaconda, in its wild state, was a semi-aquatic reptile—for hadn't Cariaco always baited his traps near the water's edge?

"If the damned thing can swim like it can travel on land, then it's all up with me!" was the thought that flashed through his mind.

As he struck the water he rolled over and dived. He swam under water until his lungs were almost ready to burst. He came to the surface for a gasp of air, dived again, and swam under water again.

Five times he did this, without once wasting time enough to glance behind to see if the serpent was following him. Then when he came to the surface, almost exhausted, he found himself in the path of a motorboat.

He cried out. A spotlight rested upon him. Then hands were dragging him, his strength almost gone, over the side.

"Why, it's—it's a cop!" someone cried, as a flashlight played upon his dripping uniform. "A cop, swimming 'way out here in the middle of the river!"

Barry glanced about fearfully. He could see nothing of the dreaded phosphorescent head breaking the surface. He heaved a huge sigh of relief.

"What's happened?" excited voices were asking him.

He dared not tell the truth, for fear they would think him a madman.

"Watch the papers in the morning, and you'll read all about it! Take me to that pier over there—over where that white yacht is moored!"

He remembered the number of the pier Vroom had named, and knew that the yacht he saw there must be the zoologist's.

"That's where he's taken Adell, if anywhere!" he thought.

Moments later, dripping wet, he was

unloaded on the pier near by and bade farewell to the boatmen. He stared at the yacht. Apparently it was deserted, even by its crew.

As he stood there, panting, he heard a scream. A woman's scream. A scream of frightful horror. It came from the yacht. He thought he recognized the voice of—Adell!

"Man, oh man!" he burst forth in a great, sobbing cry. "If that fiend is——"

He wasted no more time in words. He swarmed up the hawser and clambered over the rail. Instinctively he drew his empty pistol. The cabin was lighted. He sped across the deck toward it.

Again that shriek came from the cabin. It mounted up and up, higher and higher. It seemed to turn Barry's blood to water.

"Adell!" he called out at the top of his voice. At once he knew he had done a foolish thing. He had but warned the zoologist, and had in no way helped the girl.

He flung himself at the cabin door. It burst from its hinges beneath his weight, and he staggered into the cabin. The light almost blinded him. He blinked, and rubbed his eyes.

Before he could see clearly, his nostrils caught a familiar odor—musty, faintly sickening—the same odor he had detected when he had burst into the penthouse—the same that had arisen when Vroom had poured the contents of the vial on his uniform.

Then he knew. The ghastly silver serpent was here on the yacht! The water must have washed the substance from his own clothing when he plunged in the river, so that the giant snake no longer was driven to pursue him. Vroom must have seen the end of the chase through the streets, and had strewn the contents of the vial about the yacht so that it would attract the reptile, and he could recapture it.

But Barry did not know the whole horrible truth until he had blinked his eyes again. What he saw froze the blood in his veins.

Adell—in the coils of the serpent! Adell, staggering backward, her supple body wound round and about by the leprous silver snake. Her head thrown back, eyes seeming about to start from their sockets. Both arms free, pounding harmlessly at the horrible, scaly head with its unblinking eyes, weaving before her.

For an instant Barry's heart seemed to stop beating. He seemed momentarily hypnotized, unable to act.

He saw Vroom, in his high heels and evening clothes, gloating as he held the vial in one hand while the other was thrust in the pocket of his dinner jacket, gripping a pistol. Barry heard his demoniacal chuckle:

"She'll never live to testify against me! . . . So-o-o!"

Barry wanted to smash that gloating, sneering face to a bleeding pulp. He wanted to kill that fiendish zoologist with his two hands. But that must wait. Before that, he must save Adell—if he could!

He knew now that Vroom had used Adell as the bait to attract the gigantic serpent back to the yacht; that, unknown to her, he must have sprinkled some of the contents of the vial on her clothing.

Barry launched himself forward. With his empty pistol he struck at the weaving, scaly head. The blow slid off, deflected as if by armor plate.

He stamped on the writhing tail of the reptile. It lashed away, partly unwinding from about the girl's thighs.

"Barry!" she called faintly, imploringly. Then both the struggling girl and the serpent plunged to the floor.

Barry leaped upon the writhing thing,

stamping on its lashing tail, battering with his empty automatic at the upper part of its body. White-hot rage drove him on. Adell, her ashen face averted, had braced both hands against the scaly monster. She was exerting every last ounce of her waning strength in holding it away. No longer did she waste breath screaming.

Twenty minutes ago Barry had been fleeing in stark terror. But now that the girl he loved was in the toils of the monster, he had lost all fear. He was conscious only of a terrible lust to kill—to kill this slimy thing, to kill its fiendish master!

His punishment was hurting the great reptile. Its huge head was darting back and forth, striving to dodge his blows. Its tail, now unwinding from the girl's body, thrashed and squirmed and writhed under his feet. Then, suddenly, it reached forth like the tentacle of an octopus and coiled about Barry's ankles.

Its grip was like steel. Barry struggled to kick himself free. He clutched at a stanchion to keep his feet from being jerked from under him. For a fleeting instant he saw the pot-bellied little zoologist, dancing about in glee in his high-heeled oxfords.

With a gasp of horror Barry realized another fold of the serpent's tail had coiled about him, knee-high. It flashed upon him that every coil wound about him meant a coil unwound from Adell's body.

His life for hers? If that was the way it was fated — well, fair enough! He heard Adell gasp, and saw her roll free. He wondered if the next moment would see him crushed to death in those constricting coils, as Trehearne had been crushed.

He wanted to scream out in terror. But he told himself that, if his time had come, he'd die in silence, like a man, even though none but Vroom should know it.

The little zoologist was dancing about, the vial held high above his head, like some primitive medicine man at a human sacrifice. As Barry felt the coils tighten about his legs, he mustered all his remaining strength to fling his empty pistol at that gloating face.

But even as the weapon was about to leave his hand he changed his mind. It flashed upon him how he might, with one swift stroke, save Adell and himself and bring disaster to Vroom!

So he flung the weapon, but not at Vroom's face. The weapon smashed the pottery vial in the gloating scientist's upraised hand. Vroom was drenched with the potent liquid that held such a powerful attraction for the serpent.

For the merest instant the weaving head of the monster became motionless. Then the ghastly creature whipped about and lunged at its master. Barry saw the zoologist's face go white as he leaped backward, tugging at the pistol in his pocket.

Another instant, and the gun was drawn. Simultaneously the first fold of the silver serpent twisted about Vroom's body, pinning both arms to his sides. Barry heard a scream of utter terror. He heard the pistol clatter to the floor. He heard the snapping of bones.

Then, as the reptile's tail unwound from about Barry's legs his numbed muscles failed to support him. As he fell his head struck the stanchion. For a moment everything went blank.

Adell's voice calling his name faintly brought him to his senses. He blinked and sat up. He saw the girl, who had fainted from fright in the grip of the serpent, start toward him as she recovered consciousness.

He saw, too, a huge, misshapen serpentine shape squirming through the companionway, the form of the gigantic

silver serpent; but slow and sluggish now, because of the huge bulge in its middle.

Barry spun about and dived for the automatic that had clattered, unfired, from Vroom's fingers. He snatched it up and leaped for the deck. Adell joined him in the companionway door, and his left arm circled her shoulders. The logy reptile was slowly crawling across the deck.

The automatic roared. The serpent jerked convulsively as the steel-jacketed bullet bored into its slimy folds.

Again and again Barry fired. Adell shuddered and buried her face on his shoulder as the monster writhed and jerked and twisted itself into knots in its death throes. As he emptied the last shell into its squirming body it slid under the rail and dropped into the water.

"Barry!" Adell was clinging to him, quivering with fright. "It's been so horrible—so terrible! You saved me from the most awful——"

"Forget it!" advised Barry as he drew her closer to him. Over her shoulder, he could see the interior of the cabin, and all that was left of the pot-bellied zoologist—a high-heeled shoe, fallen from his foot as he had vanished down the serpent's maw.

Ballad of the Gods

By HENRY KUTTNER

Donal has turned from his father's god, and worships the fish-god Vake,
And he spills the blood of his sacrifice to the god of the Bottomless Lake.
He thinks that once more the deer and fish will die by his spear and his rod;
And he is a fool, for Jubbudar-Thool is a great and a jealous god.

Jubbudar-Thool is his father's god, and a mighty god is he;
His head is carved from a weathered rock, and his trunk was the trunk of a tree;
His head is carved from an ancient rock where a gaping mouth is cut:
And Jubbudar-Thool with his mouth a-drool has stalked from the temple hut!

Donal has called on the fish-god Vake, but the drowsy fish-god nods;
For why should the life of a man cause strife in the brotherhood of the gods?
And Donal's stare was a frozen glare, and his mouth was a fear-fixed grin
When the hut-wall buckled beneath a blow and his father's god came in!

A man may live in the blackest sin, and live to a ripe old age;
He may sin with the wife of another man and escape the avenger's rage;
He may take two wives and a hundred lives, and live by deceits and frauds
Till the day he dies: but if he is wise he will worship his father's gods.

Yvala

By C. L. MOORE

Yvala was a gloriously beautiful woman—Lilith, Circe and Helen combined into one—yet she was cruel and dangerous as a flame from hell

NORTHWEST SMITH leaned against a pile of hemp-wrapped bales from the Martian drylands and stared with expressionless eyes, paler than pale steel, over the confusion of the Lakkdarol space-port before him. In the clear Martian day the tatters of his leather spaceman's garb were pitilessly plain, the ray-burns and the rents of a hundred casual brawls. It was evident at a glance that Smith had fallen upon evil days. One might have guessed by the shabbiness of his clothing that his pockets were empty, the charge in his ray-gun low.

Squatting on his heels beside the lounging Earthman, Yarol the Venusian bent his yellow head absently over the thin-bladed dagger which he was juggling in one of the queer, interminable Venusian games so pointless to outsiders. Upon him too the weight of ill fortune seemed to have pressed heavily. It was eloquent in his own shabby garments, his empty holster. But the insouciant face he lifted to Smith was as careless as ever, and no more of weariness and wisdom and pure cat-savagery looked out from his sidelong black eyes than Smith was accustomed to see there. Yarol's face was the face of a seraph, as so many Venusian faces are likely to be, but the set of his mouth told a tale of dissoluteness and reckless violence which belied his features' racial good looks.

"Another half-hour and we eat," he grinned up at his tall companion.

Smith glanced at the tri-time watch on his wrist.

"If you haven't been having another dope dream," he grunted. "Luck's been against us so long I can't quite believe in a change now."

"By Pharol I swear it," smiled Yarol. "The man came up to me in the *New Chicago* last night and told me in so many words how much money was waiting if we'd meet him here at noon."

Smith grunted again and deliberately took up another notch in the belt that circled his lean waist. Yarol laughed softly, a murmur of true Venusian sweetness, as he bent again to the juggling of his knife. Above his bent blond head Smith looked out again across the busy port.

Lakkdarol is an Earthman's town upon Martian soil, blending all the more violent elements of both worlds in its lawless heart, and the scene he watched had under-currents that only a ranger of the spaceways could fully appreciate. A semblance of discipline is maintained there, but only the space-rangers know how superficial that likeness is. Smith grinned a little to himself, knowing that the bales being trundled down the gang-plank from the Martian liner *Inghti* carried a core of that precious Martian "lamb's-wool" on which the duties run so high. And a whisper had run through the *New Chicago* last night as they sat over their *segir*-whisky glasses that the shipment of

"He stood bathed in light that permeated the very atoms of his soul."

grain from Denver expected in at noon on the *Friedland* would have a copious leavening of opium in its heart. By devious ways, in whispers running from mouth to mouth covertly through the spacemen's rendezvous, the outlaws of the spaceways glean more knowledge than the Patrol ever knows.

Smith watched a little air-freight vessel, scarcely a quarter the size of the monstrous ships of the Lines, rolling sluggishly out from the municipal hangar far across the square, and a little frown puckered his brows. The ship bore only the non-committal numerals which are all the freighters carry by way of identification, but that particular sequence was notorious among the initiate. The ship was a slaver.

This dealing in human freight had received a great impetus at the stimulation of space-travel, when the temptation pre-

sented by the savage tribes on alien planets was too great to be ignored by unscrupulous Earthmen who saw vast fields opening up before them. For even upon Earth slaving has never died entirely, and Mars and Venus knew a small and legitimate traffic in it before John Willard and his gang of outlaws made the very word "slaving" anathema on three worlds. The Willards still ran their pirate convoys along the spaceways three generations later, and Smith knew he was looking at one now, smuggling a cargo of misery out of Lakkdarol for distribution among the secret markets of Mars.

FURTHER meditations on the subject were cut short by Yarol's abrupt rise to his feet. Smith turned his head slowly and saw a little man at their elbow, his rotundity cloaked in a long mantle like those affected by the lower class of Martian shopkeepers in their walks abroad. But the face that peered up into his was frankly Celtic. Smith's expressionless features broke reluctantly into a grin as he met the irrepressible good-humor on that fat Irish face from home. He had not set foot upon Earth's soil for over a year now—the price on his liberty was too high in his native land—and curious pricks of homesickness came over him at the oddest moments. Even the toughest of space-rangers know them sometimes. The ties with the home planet are strong.

"You Smith?" demanded the little man in a rich Celtic voice.

Smith looked down at him a moment in cold-eyed silence. There was much more in that query than met the ear. Northwest Smith's name was one too well known in the annals of the Patrol for him to acknowledge it incautiously. The little Irishman's direct question implied what he had been expecting—if he acknowledged the name he met the man on the grounds of outlawry, which would mean that the employment in prospect was to be as illegal as he had thought it would be.

The merry blue eyes twinkled up at him. The man was laughing to himself at the Celtic subtlety with which he had introduced his subject. And again, involuntarily, Smith's straight mouth relaxed into a reluctant grin.

"I am," he said recklessly.

"I've been looking for you. There's a job to be done that'll pay you well, if you want to risk it."

Smith's pale eyes glanced about them warily. No one was within earshot. The place seemed as good as any other for the discussion of extra-legal bargains.

"What is it?" he demanded.

The little man glanced down at Yarol, who had dropped to one knee again and was flicking his knife tirelessly in the intricacies of his queer game. He had apparently lost interest in the whole proceeding.

"It'll take the both of you," said the Irishman in his merry, rich voice. "Do you see that air freighter loading over there?" and he nodded toward the slaver.

Smith's head jerked in mute acknowledgment.

"It's a Willard ship, as I suppose you know. But the business is running pretty low these days. Cargoes too hot to ship. The Patrol is shutting down hard, and receipts have slackened like the devil in the last year. I suppose you've heard that too."

Smith nodded again without words. He had.

"Well, what we lose in quantity we have to make up in quality. Remember the prices the Minga girls used to bring?"

Smith's face was expressionless. He remembered very well indeed, but he said nothing.

"Along toward the last, kings could hardly pay the price they were asking for

those girls. That's really the best market, if you want to get into the 'ivory' trade. Women. And there you come in. Did you ever hear of Cembre?"

Blank-eyed, Smith shook his head. For once he had run across a name whose rumors he had never encountered before in all the tavern gossip.

"Well, on one of Jupiter's moons—which one I'll tell you later, if you decide to accept—a Venusian named Cembre was wrecked years ago. By a miracle he survived and managed to escape; but the hardships he'd undergone unsettled his mind, and he couldn't do much but rave about the beautiful sirens he'd seen while he was wandering through the jungles there. Nobody paid any attention to him until the same thing happened again, this time only about a month ago. Another man came back half-cracked from struggling through the jungles, babbling about women so beautiful a man could go mad just from looking at them.

"Well, the Willards heard of it. The whole thing may sound like a pipe-dream, but they've got the idea it's worth investigating. And they can afford to indulge their whims, you know. So they're outfitting a small expedition to see what basis there may be for the myth of Cembre's sirens. If you want to try it, you're hired."

Smith slanted a non-committal glance downward into Yarol's uplifted black gaze. Neither spoke.

"You'll want to talk it over," said the little Irishman comprehendingly. "Suppose you meet me in the *New Chicago* at sundown and tell me what you've decided."

"Good enough," grunted Smith. The fat Celt grinned again and was gone in a swirl of black cloak and a flash of Irish merriment.

"Cold-blooded little devil," murmured Smith, looking after the departing Earthman. "It's a dirty business, Yarol."

"Money's clean," observed Yarol lightly. "And I'm not a man to let my scruples stand in the way of my meals. I say take it. Someone'll go, and it might as well be us."

Smith shrugged.

"We've got to eat," he admitted.

"THIS," murmured Yarol, staring downward on hands and knees at the edge of the space-ship's floor-port, "is the prettiest little hell I ever expect to see."

The vessel was arching in a long curve around the Jovian moon as its pilot braked slowly for descent, and a panorama of ravening jungle slipped by in an unchanging wilderness below the floor-port.

Their presence here, skimming through the upper atmosphere of the wild little satellite, was the end of a long series of the smoothest journeying either had ever known. The Willard network was perfect over the three planets and the colonized satellites beyond, and over the ships that ply the spaceways. This neat little exploring vessel, with its crew of three coarse-faced, sullen slavers, had awaited them at the end of their journey outward from Lakkdarol, fully fitted with supplies and every accessory the most modern adventurer could desire. It even had a silken prison room for the hypothetical sirens whom they were to carry back for the Willard approval and the Willard markets if the journey proved successful.

"It's been easy so far," observed Smith, squinting downward over the little Venusian's shoulder. "Can't expect everything, you know. But that *is* a bad-looking place."

The dull-faced pilot at the controls grunted in fervent agreement as he craned

his neck to watch the little world spinning below them.

"Damn' glad I'm not goin' out with you," he articulated thickly over a mouthful of tobacco.

Yarol flung him a cheerful Venusian anathema in reply, but Smith did not speak. He had little liking and less trust in this sullen and silent crew. If he was not mistaken—and he rarely made mistakes in his appraisal of men—there was going to be trouble with the three before they completed their journey back into civilization. Now he turned his broad back to the pilot and stared downward.

From above, the moon seemed covered with the worst type of semi-animate, ravenous super-tropical jungle, reeking with fertility and sudden death, hot under lurid Jupiter's blaze. They saw no signs of human life anywhere below as their ship swept in its long curve over the jungle. The tree-tops spread in an unbroken blanket over the whole sphere of the satellite. Yarol, peering downward, murmured,

"No water. Somehow I always expect sirens to have fish-tails."

Out of his queer, heterogeneous past Smith dragged a fragment of ancient verse, "—gulfs enchanted, where the sirens sing . . ." and said aloud,

"They're supposed to sing, too. Oh, it'll probably turn out to be a pack of black-faced savages, if there's anything but delirium behind the story."

The ship was spiraling down now, and the jungle rushed up to meet them at express-train speed. Once again the little moon spun under their searching eyes, flower-garlanded, green with fertile life, massed solid in tangles of ravening growth. Then the pilot's hands closed hard on the controls and with a shriek of protesting atmosphere the little space-ship slid in a long dive toward the unbroken jungle below.

In a great crashing and crackling they sank groundward through smothers of foliage that masked the ports and plunged the interior of the ship into a green twilight. With scarcely an impact the jungle floor received them. The pilot leaned back in his seat and heaved a tobacco-redolent sigh. His work was done. Incuriously he glanced at the forward port.

Yarol was scrambling up from the floor-glass that now showed nothing but crushed vines and branches and the reeking mud of the moon's surface. He joined Smith and the pilot at the forward port.

They were submerged in jungle. Great serpentine branches and vines like cables looped downward in broken lengths from the shattered trees which had given way at their entrance. It was an animate jungle, full of hungry, reaching things that sprang in one wild, prolific tangle from the rich mud. Raw-colored flowers, yards across, turned sucking mouths blindly against the glass here and there, trickles of green juice slavering down the clear surface from their insensate hunger. A thorn-fanged vine lashed out as they stood staring and slid harmlessly along the glass, lashed again and again blindly until the prongs were dulled and green juice bled from its bruised surfaces.

"Well, we'll have blasting to do after all," murmured Smith as he looked out into the ravenous jungle. "No wonder those poor devils came back a little cracked. I don't see how they got through at all. It's——"

"Well — Pharol take me!" breathed Yarol in so reverent a whisper that Smith's voice broke off in mid-sentence and he spun around with a hand dropping to his gun to front the little Venusian, who had sought the stern port in his exploration.

"It's a road!" gasped Yarol. "Black Pharol can have me for dinner if there isn't a road just outside here!"

THE pilot reached for a noxious Martian cigarette and stretched luxuriously, quite uninterested. But Smith had reached the Venusian's side before he finished speaking, and in silence the two stared out upon the surprizing scene the stern port framed. A broad roadway stretched arrow-straight into the dimness of the jungle. At its edges the hungry green things ceased abruptly, not encroaching by so much as a tendril or a leaf into the clearness of the path. Even overhead the branches had been forbidden to intrude, their vine-looped greenery forming an arch above the road. It was as if a destroying beam had played through the jungle, killing all life in its path. Even the oozing mud was firmed here into a smooth pavement. Empty, enigmatic, the clear way slanted across their line of vision and on into the writhing jungle.

"Well," Yarol broke the silence at last, "here's a good start. All we've got to do is follow the road. It's a safe bet there won't be any lovely ladies wandering around through this jungle. From the looks of the road there must be some civilized people on the moon after all."

"I'd be happier if I knew what made it," said Smith. "There are some damned queer things on some of the moons and asteroids."

Yarol's cat-eyes were shining.

"That's what I like about this life," he grinned. "You don't get bored. Well, what do the readings say?"

From his seat at the control panel the pilot glanced at the gages which gave automatic report on air and gravity outside.

"O. K.," he grunted. "Better take blast-guns."

Smith shrugged off his sudden uneasiness and turned to the weapon rack.

"Plenty of charges, too," he said. "No telling what we'll run into."

The pilot rolled his poisonous cigarette between thick lips and said, "Luck. You'll need it," as the two turned to the outer lock. He had all the indifference of his class to anything but his own comfort and the completion of his allotted tasks with a minimum of effort, and he scarcely troubled to turn his head as the lock swung open upon an almost overwhelming gush of thick, hot air, redolent of green growing things and the stench of swift decay.

A vine-tip lashed violently into the opened door as Smith and Yarol stood staring. Yarol snapped a Venusian oath and dodged back, drawing his blast-gun. An instant later the eye-destroying blaze of it sheered a path of destruction through the lush vegetable carnivora straight toward the slanting roadway a dozen feet away. There was an immense hissing and sizzling of annihilated green stuff, and an empty path stretched before them across the little space which parted the ship's outer lock from the road. Yarol stepped down into reeking mud that bubbled up around his boots with a stench of fertility and decay. He swore again as he sank knee-deep into its blackness. Smith, grinning, joined him. Side by side they floundered through the ooze toward the road.

Short though the distance was, it took them all of ten minutes to cover it. Green things whipped out toward them from the walls of sheared forest where the blast-gun had burned, and both were bleeding from a dozen small scratches and thorn-flicks, breathless and angry and very muddy indeed before they reached their goal and dragged themselves onto the firmness of the roadway.

"Whew!" gasped Yarol, stamping the

mud from his caked boots. "Pharol can have me if I stir a step off this road after this. There isn't a siren alive who could lure me back into that hell again. Poor Cembre!"

"Come on," said Smith. "Which way?"

Yarol slatted sweat from his forehead and drew a deep breath, his nostrils wrinkled distastefully.

"Into the breeze, if you ask me. Did you ever smell such a stench? And hot! Gods! I'm soaked through already."

Without words Smith nodded and turned to the right, from where a faint breeze stirred the heavy, moisture-laden air. His own lean body was impervious to a great variation in climate, but even Yarol, native of the Hot Planet, dripped with sweat already and Smith's own leather-tanned face glistened and his shirt clung in wet patches to his shoulders.

The cool breeze struck gratefully upon their faces as they turned into the wind. In a gasping silence they plodded muddily up the road, their wonder deepening as they advanced. What had made the roadway became more of a mystery at every step. No vehicle tracks marked the firm ground, no footprints. And nowhere by so much as a hair's breadth did the forest encroach upon the path.

On both sides, beyond the rigid limits of the road, the lush and cannibalistic life of the vegetation went on. Vines dangled great sucking disks and thorn-toothed creepers in the thick air, ready for a deadly cast at anything that wandered within reach. Small reptilian things scuttling through the reeking swamp mud squeaked now and then in the toils of some thorny trap, and twice they heard the hollow bellowing of some invisible monster. It was raw primeval life booming and thrashing and devouring all about them, a planet in the first throes of animate life.

But here on the roadway that could have been made by nothing less than a well-advanced civilization the ravening jungle seemed very far away, like some unreal world enacting its primitive dramas upon a stage. Before they had gone far they were paying little heed to it, and the bellowing and the lashing, hungry vines and the ravenous forest growths faded into half-heard oblivion. Nothing out of that world entered upon the roadway.

As they advanced the sweltering heat abated in the steady breeze that was blowing down the road. There was a faint perfume upon it, sweet and light and utterly alien to the fetor of the reeking swamps which bordered their way. The scented gusts of it fanned their hot faces gently.

Smith was glancing over his shoulder at regular intervals, and a pucker of uneasiness drew his brows together.

"If we don't have trouble with that crew of ours before we're through," he said, "I'll buy you a case of *segir*."

"It's a bet," agreed Yarol cheerfully, turning up to Smith his sidelong cat-eyes as insouciantly savage as the ravening jungle around them. "Though they were a pretty tough trio, at that."

"They may have the idea they can leave us here and collect our share of the money back home," said Smith. "Or once we get the girls they may want to dump us and take them on alone. And if they haven't thought of anything yet, they will."

"Up to no good, the whole bunch of 'em," grinned Yarol. "They—they——"

His voice faltered and faded into silence. There was a sound upon the breeze. Smith had stopped dead-still, his ears straining to recapture the echo of that murmur which had come blowing toward them on the breeze. Such a sound as that might have come drifting over the walls of Paradise.

In the silence as they stood with caught

breath it came again—a lilt of the loveliest, most exquisitely elusive laughter. From very far away it came floating to their ears, the lovely ghost of a woman's laughing. There was in it a caress of kissing sweetness. It brushed over Smith's nerves like the brush of lingering fingers and died away into throbbing silence that seemed reluctant to let the exquisite sound of it fade into echoes and cease.

The two men faced each other in rapt bewilderment. Finally Yarol found his voice.

"Sirens!" he breathed. "They don't have to sing if they can laugh like that! Come on!"

At a swifter pace they went on up the road. The breeze blew fragrantly against their faces. After a while its perfumed breath carried to their ears another faint, far-away echo of that heavenly laughter, sweeter than honey, drifting on the wind in fading cadences that died away by imperceptible degrees until they could no longer be sure if it was the lovely laughter they heard or the quickened beating of their own hearts.

Yet before them the road stretched emptily, very still in the green twilight under the low-arching trees. There seemed to be a sort of haze here, so that though the road ran straight the green dimness veiled what lay ahead and they walked in a queer silence along the roadway through ravening jungles whose sights and sounds might almost have been on another world for all the heed they paid them. Their ears were straining for a repetition of that low and lovely laughter, and the expectation of it gripped them in an unheeding spell which wiped out all other things but its own delicious echoes.

When they first became aware of a pale glimmer in the twilight greenness ahead, neither could have told. But somehow they were not surprized that a girl was pacing slowly down the roadway toward them, half veiled in the jungle dimness under the trees.

To Smith she was a figure walking straight out of a dream. Even at that distance her beauty had a still enchantment that swallowed up all his wondering in a strange and magical peace. Beauty flowed along the long, curved lines of her body, alternately cloaked and revealed by the drifting garment of her hair, and the slow, swinging grace of her as she walked was a potent enchantment that gripped him helpless in its spell.

Then another glimmer in the dimness caught his eyes away from the bewitchment that approached, and in bewilderment he saw that another girl was pacing forward under the low-hanging trees, her hair swinging about her in slow drifts that veiled and unveiled the loveliness of a body as exquisite as the first. That first was nearer now, so that he could see the enchantment of her face, pale golden and lovelier than a dream with its subtly molded smoothness and delicately tilted planes of cheek-bone and cheek smoothing deliciously upward into a broad, low forehead whence the richly colored hair sprang back in tendrils like licking flames. There was a subtly Slavic tilting to those honey-colored features, hinted in the breadth of the cheeks and the sweet straightness with which their planes slanted downward to a mouth colored like hot embers, curving now in a smile that promised—heaven.

She was very near. He could see the peach-like bloom upon her pale gold limbs and the very throb of the pulse beating in her round throat, and the veiled eyes sought his. But behind her that second girl was nearing, every whit as lovely as the first, and her beauty drew his gaze magnet-like to its own delicate flow and ripple of enchantment. And

beyond her—yes, another was coming, and beyond her a fourth; and in the green twilight behind these first, pale blurs bespoke the presence of yet more.

And they were identical. Smith's bewildered eyes flew from face to face, seeking and finding what his brain could still not quite believe. Feature by feature, curve by curve, they were identical. Five, six, seven honey-colored bodies, half veiled in richly tinted hair, swayed toward him. Seven, eight, nine exquisite faces smiled their promise of ecstasy. Dizzy and incredulous, he felt a hand grip his shoulder. Yarol's voice, bemused, half whispered, murmured,

"Is this paradise—or are we both mad?"

The sound of it brought Smith out of his tranced bewitchment. He shook his head sharply, like a man half awake and striving for clarity, and said,

"Do they all look alike to you?"

"Every one. Exquisite—exquisite—did you ever see such satin-black hair?"

"Black—black?" Smith muttered that over stupidly, wondering what was so wrong with the word. When realization broke upon him at last, the shock of it was strong enough to jerk his eyes away from the enchantment before him and turn them sharply around to the little Venusian's rapt face.

Its stainless clarity was set in a mask of almost holy wonder. Even the wisdom and weariness and savagery of its black eyes was lost in the glamor of what they gazed on. His voice murmured, almost to itself,

"And white—so white—like lilies, aren't they?—blacker and whiter than——"

"Are you crazy?" Smith's voice broke harshly upon the Venusian's rapture. That trance-like mask broke before the impact of his exclamation. Like a man awaking from a dream, Yarol turned blinking to his friend.

"Crazy? Why—why—aren't we both? How else could we be seeing a sight like this?"

"One of us is," said Smith grimly. "I'm looking at red-haired girls colored like—like peaches."

Yarol blinked again. His eyes sought the bevy of bewildering loveliness in the roadway. He said,

"It's you, then. They've got black hair, every one of them, shiny and smooth and black as so many lengths of satin, and nothing in creation is whiter than their bodies."

SMITH's pale eyes turned again to the road. Again they met honey-pale curves and planes of velvet flesh half veiled in hair like drifting flames. He shook his head once more, dazedly.

The girls hovered before him in the green dimness, moving with little restive steps back and forth on the hard-beaten road, their feet like the drift of flower-petals for lightness, their hair rippling away from the smoothly swelling curves of their bodies and furling about them again in ceaseless motion. They turned lingering eyes to the two men, but they did not speak.

Then down the wind again came drifting the far echo of that exquisite, lilting laugh. The sweetness of it made the very breeze brush lighter against their faces. It was a caress and a promise and a summoning almost irresistible, floating past them and drifting away into the distance in low, far-off cadences that lingered in their ears long after its audible music had ceased.

The sound of it woke Smith out of his daze, and he turned to the nearest girl, blurting,

"Who are you?"

Among the fluttering throng a little

shiver of excitement ran. Lovely, identical faces turned to him from all over the whole group, and the one addressed smiled bewilderingly.

"I am Yvala," she said in a voice smoother than silk, pitched to caress the ear and ripple along the very nerve fibers with a slow and soothing sweetness. And she had spoken in English! It was long since Smith had heard his mother tongue. The sound of it plucked at some hidden heart-string with intolerable poignancy, the home language spoken in a voice of enchanted sweetness. For a moment he could not speak.

The silence broke to Yarol's low whistle of surprize.

"I know now we're crazy," he murmured. "No other way to explain her speaking in High Venusian. Why, she can't ever have——"

"High Venusian!" exclaimed Smith, startled out of his moment of silence. "She spoke English!"

They stared at each other, wild suspicions rising in their eyes. In desperation Smith turned and hurled the question again at another of the lovely throng, waiting breathless for her answer to be sure his ears had not deceived him.

"Yvala—I am Yvala," she answered in just that silken voice with which the first had answered. It was English unmistakably, and sweet with memories of home.

Behind her among the bevy of curved, peach-colored bodies and veils of richly tinted hair other full red lips moved and other velvety voices murmured, "Yvala, Yvala, I am Yvala," like dying echoes drifting from mouth to mouth until the last syllable of the strange and lovely name faded into silence.

Across the stunned quiet that fell as their murmurs died the breeze blew again, and once more that sweet, low laughter rang from far away in their ears, rising and falling on the wind until their pulses beat in answer, and falling, fading, dying away reluctantly on the fragrant breeze.

"What — who was that?" demanded Smith softly of the fluttering girls, as the last of it faded into silence.

"It was Yvala," they chorused in caressing voices like multiple echoes of the same rich, lingering tones. "Yvala laughs —Yvala calls. . . . Come with us to Yvala. . . ."

Yarol said in a sudden ripple of musical speech,

"Geth norri d'Yvali?" at the same moment that Smith's query broke out,

"Who is Yvala, then?" in his own seldom-used mother tongue.

But they got no reply to that, only beckonings and murmurous repetitions of the name, "Yvala, Yvala, Yvala——" and smiles that set their pulses beating faster. Yarol reached out a tentative hand toward the nearest, but she melted like smoke out of his grasp so that he no more than grazed the velvety flesh of her shoulder with a touch that left his fingers tingling delightfully. She smiled over her shoulder ardently, and Yarol gripped Smith's arm.

"Come on," he said urgently.

In a pleasant dream of low voices and lovely warm bodies circling just out of reach they went slowly on down the road in the midst of that hovering group, walking up-wind whence that tantalizing laughter had rung, and all about them the golden girls circled on restless, drifting feet, their hair floating and furling about the loveliness of their half-seen bodies, the echoes of that single name rising and falling in cadences as rich and smooth as cream. Yvala—Yvala—Yvala—a magical spell to urge them on their way.

How long they walked they never knew. The changeless jungle slid away behind them unnoticed; the broad, enig-

matic pavement stretched ahead, a mysterious, green gloom shadowing the whole length of that laughter-haunted roadway. Nothing had any meaning to them outside the circle the murmurous girls were weaving with their swaying bodies and swinging hair and voices like the echoes of a dream. All the wonder and incredulity and bewilderment in the minds of the two men had sunk away into nothingness, drowned and swallowed up in the flagrant magic of their enchantresses.

After a long, rapt while they came to the roadway's end. Smith lifted dreaming pale eyes and saw as if through a veil, so remotely that the scene had little meaning to him, the great park-like clearing stretching away before them as the jungle walls fell away on either side. Here the primeval swamplands and animate green life ceased abruptly to make way for a scene that might have been lifted straight over a million years. The clearing was columned with great patriarchal trees ages removed in evolution from the snaky things which grew in the hungry jungle. Their leaves roofed the place in swaying greenery through which the light sifted with twilight softness upon a carpet of flower-starred moss. With one step they spanned ages of evolution and entered into the lovely dim clearing that might have been lifted out of a world a million years older than the jungle that raved impotently around its borders.

The moss was velvety under their pacing feet. With eyes that but half comprehended what they saw, Smith gazed out across the twilight vistas through the green gloom brooding beneath the trees. It was a hushed place, mystical, very quiet. He thought sometimes he saw the flash of life through the leaves overhead, the stir of it among the trees as small wild things crossed their path and birds fluttered in the foliage, but he could not be sure. Once or twice it seemed to him that he had caught an echo of bird-song, somehow as if the melody had rung in his ears a moment before, and only now, when the sound was fading, did he realize it. But not once did he hear an actual song note or see any animate life, though the presence of it was rife in the green twilight beneath the leaves.

They went on slowly. Once he could have sworn he saw a dappled fawn staring at him with wide, unhappy eyes from a covert of branches, but when he looked closer there was nothing but leaves swaying emptily. And once upon his inner ear, as if with the echo of a just-past sound, he thought he heard a stallion's high whinny. But after all it did not greatly matter. The girls were shepherding them on over the flowery moss, circling like hollow-throated doves whose only music was "Yvala—Yvala—Yvala . . ." in unending harmony of rising and falling notes.

They paced on dreamily, the trees and mossy vistas of park sliding smoothly away behind them in unchanging quiet. And more and more strongly that impression of life among the trees nagged at Smith's mind. He wondered if he might not be developing hallucinations, for no arrangement of branches and shadows could explain the wild boar's head that he could have sworn thrust out among the leaves to stare at him for an instant with small, shamed eyes before it melted into patterned shadow under his direct gaze.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes in momentary terror lest his own brain was betraying him, and an instant later was peering uncertainly at the avenue between two low-hanging trees where from the corner of his eye he thought he had seen a magnificent white stallion hesitating with startled head upflung and the queerest, urgent look in its eyes, somehow warning and afraid—and ashamed. But

It faded into mere leaf-cast shadows when he turned.

And once he started and stumbled over what was nothing more than a leafy branch lying across their path, yet which an instant before had looked bewilderingly like a low-slung cat-beast slinking across the moss with sullen, hot eyes upturned in hate and warning and distress to his.

There was something about these animals that roused a vague unrest in his mind when he looked at them—something in their eyes that was warning and agonized and more hotly aware than are the eyes of beasts—something queerly dreadful and hauntingly familiar about the set of their heads upon their shoulders—hinting horribly at another gait than the four-footed.

At last, just after a graceful doe had bounded out of the leaves, hesitated an instant and flashed away with a fleetness that did not look like the fleetness of a quadruped, turning upon him as she vanished a great-eyed agony that was warning as a cry, Smith halted in his tracks. Uneasiness too deep to be magicked away by the crooning girls urged him of danger. He paused and looked uncertainly around. The doe had melted into leaf-shadows flickering upon the moss, but he could not forget the haunting shame and the warning of her eyes.

He stared about the dim greenness of the tree-roofed clearing. Was all this a lotus-dream, an illusion of jungle fever, or a suddenly unstable mind? Could he have imagined those beasts with their anguished eyes and their terribly familiar outlines of head and neck upon four-footed bodies? Was any of it real at all?

More for reassurance than for any other reason he reached out suddenly and seized the nearest honey-colored girl in a quick grip. Yes, she was tangible. His fingers closed about a firm and rounded arm, smoothly soft with the feel of peach-bloom velvet over its curving surface. The girl did not pull away. She stopped dead-still at his touch, slowly turning her head, lifting her face to his with a dream-like easiness, tilting her chin high until the long, full curve of her throat was arched taut and he could see the pulse beating hard under her velvet flesh. Her lips parted softly, her lids drooped low.

His other arm went out of its own accord, drawing her against him. Then her hands were in his hair, pulling his head down to hers, and all his uneasiness and distress and latent terror spun away at the kiss of her parted lips.

The next thing he realized was that he was strolling on under the trees, a girl's lithe body moving in the bend of his arm. Her very nearness was a delight that sent his senses reeling, so that the green woodland was vague as a dream and the only reality dwelt in the honey-colored loveliness in the circle of his arm.

Dimly he was aware that Yarol strolled parallel with them a little distance away through the leaves, a bright head on his shoulder, another golden girl leaning against his encircling arm. She was so perfectly the counterpart of his own lovely captive that she might have been a reflection in a mirror. Uneasily a remembrance swam up in Smith's mind. Did it seem to Yarol that a snow-white maiden walked with him, a black head leaned upon his shoulder? Was the little Venusian's mind yielding to the spell of the place, or was it his own? What tongue could it be that the girls spoke which fell upon his ears in English phrases and upon Yarol's in the musical lilt of High Venusian? Were they both mad?

Then in his arm the supple golden body stirred, the softly shadowed face turned up to his. The woodland vanished like smoke from about him in the magic of her lips.

There were dim glades among the trees where piles of white ruins met Smith's unseeing eyes sometimes without leaving more than the merest trace of conscious remembrance. Vague wonders swam through his mind of what they might once have been, what vanished race had wrested this clearing from the jungle and died without leaving any trace save these. But he did not care. It had no significance. Even the half-seen beasts, who now turned eyes full of sorrow and despair rather than warning, had lost all meaning to his enchanted brain. In a lotus dream he wandered on in the direction he was urged, unthinking, unalarmed. It was very sweet to stroll so through the dim green gloom, with purest magic in the bend of his arm. He was content.

They strolled past the white ruins of scattered buildings, past great bending trees that dappled them with shadow. The moss yielded underfoot as softly as thick-piled carpets. Unseen beasts slunk by them now and then, so that the tail of Smith's eye was continually catching the —almost—hint of humanity in the lines of their bodies, the set of a head upon bestial shoulders, the clarity of urgent eyes. But he did not really see them.

Sweetly—intolerably sweetly and softly, laughter rang through the woods. Smith's head flung up like a startled stallion's. It was a stronger laughter now, from near, very near among the leaves. It seemed to him that the voice indeed must come from some lovely, ardent houri leaning over the wall of Paradise—that he had come a long way in search of her and now trembled on the very brink of his journey's end. The low and lovely sound echoed through the trees, ringing down the green twilight aisles, shivering the leaves together. It was everywhere at once, a little world of music superimposed upon the world of matter, enclosing everything within its scope in a magical spell that left no room for any other thing but its lovely presence. And its command rang through Smith's mind with the sharpness of a sword in his flesh, calling, calling unbearably through the woods.

Then they came out of the trees into a little space of mossy clearing in whose center a small white temple rose. Somehow Yarol was there too—and somehow they were alone. Those exquisite girls had melted like smoke into oblivion. The two men stood quite still, their eyes dazed as they stared. This building was the only one they had seen whose columns still stood upright, and only here could they tell that the architecture of those fallen walls whose ruins had dotted the wooded glades had been one at variance to anything on any world they knew. But upon the mystery of that they had no desire to dwell. For the woman those slim columns housed drove every other thought out of their dazzled minds.

She stood in the center of the tiny temple. She was pale golden, half veiled in the long cloak of her curls. And if the siren girls had been lovely, then here stood loveliness incarnate. Those girls had worn her form and face. Here was that same exquisitely molded body, colored like honey, half revealed among the drifts of hair that clung to it like tendrils of bright flames. But those bewildering girls had been mere echoes of the beauty that faced them now. Smith stared with a kindling of colorless eyes.

Here was Lilith—here was Helen—here was Circe—here before him stood all the beauty of all the legends of mankind; here on this marble floor, facing them gravely, with unsmiling eyes. For the first time he looked into the eyes that lighted that sweet, tilt-planed face, and his very soul gasped from the sudden plunge into their poignant blueness. It

was not a vivid blue, not a blazing one, but its intensity far transcended anything he had words to name. In that business a man's soul could sink for ever, reaching no bottom, stirred by no tides, drowned and steeped through and through with an infinity of absolute light.

When the blue, blue gaze released him he gasped once, like a drowning man, and then stared with new amazement upon a reality whose truth had escaped him until this moment. That instant of submerged ecstasy in the blue deeps of her eyes must have opened a door in his brain to new knowledge, for he saw as he stared a very strange quality in the loveliness he faced.

Tangible beauty dwelt here, an indwelling thing that could root itself in human flesh and clothe a body in loveliness as with a garment. Here was more than fleshly beauty, more than symmetry of face and body. A quality like a flame glowed all but visibly — no, more than visibly — along the peach-bloomy lines and smoothly swelling curves of her, giving a glory to the high tilt of her bosom and the long, subtly curved thigh and the exquisite line of shoulder gliding down into fuller beauty half veiled in drifting hair.

In that dazed, revealing moment her loveliness shimmered before him, too intensely for his human senses to perceive save as a dazzle of intolerable beauty before his half-comprehending eyes. He flung up his hands to shut the glory out and stood for a moment with hidden eyes in a self-imposed darkness through which beauty blazed with an intensity that transcended the visible and beat unbearably on every fiber of his being until he stood bathed in light that permeated the ultimate atoms of his soul.

Then the blaze died. He lowered shaking hands and saw that lovely, pale-gold face melting slowly into a smile of such heavenly promise that for an instant his senses failed him again and the world spun dizzily around a focus of honey-pale features breaking into arcs and softly shadowed curves, as the velvety mouth curled slowly into a smile.

"All strangers are very welcome here," crooned a voice like a vibration of sheerest silk, sweeter than honey, caressing as the brush of a kissing mouth. And she had spoken in the purest of earthly English. Smith found his voice.

"Who—who are you?" he asked in a queer gasp, as if his very breath were stopped by the magic he faced.

Before she could answer, Yarol's voice broke in, a little unsteady with sudden, savage anger.

"Can't you answer in the language you're addressed in?" he demanded in a violent undertone. "The least you could do is ask her name in High Venusian. How do you know she speaks English?"

QUITE speechless, Smith turned a blank gray gaze upon his companion. He saw the blaze of hot Venusian temper fade like mist from Yarol's black eyes as he turned to the glory in the temple. And in the lovely, liquid cadences of his native tongue, that brims so exquisitely with hyperbole and symbolism, he said,

"Oh, lovely and night-dark lady, what name is laid upon you to tell how whiter than sea-foam is your loveliness?"

For a moment, listening to the beauty of phrase and sound that dwells in the High Venusian tongue, Smith doubted his own ears. For though she had spoken in English, yet the loveliness of Yarol's speech seemed infinitely more suited to have fallen from the lyric curving of her velvet-red mouth. Such lips, he thought, could never utter less than pure music, and English is not a musical tongue.

But explain Yarol's visual illusion he could not, for his own steel-pale eyes were stedfast upon richly colored hair

and pale gold flesh, and no stretch of imagination could transform them into the black and snow-whiteness his companion claimed to see.

A hint of mirth crept into the smile that curled up the softness of her mouth as Yarol spoke. She answered them both in one speech that to Smith was pure English, though he guessed that it fell upon Yarol's ears in the music of High Venusian cadences.

"I am Beauty," she told them serenely. "I am incarnate Beauty. But Yvala is my name. Let there be no quarrel between you, for each man hears me in the tongue his heart speaks, and sees me in the image which spells beauty to his own soul. For I am all men's desire incarnate in one being, and there is no beauty but Me."

"But—those others?"

"I am the only dweller here—but you have known the shadows of myself, leading you through devious ways into the presence of Yvala. Had you not gazed first upon these reflections of my beauty, its fullness which you see now would have blinded and destroyed you utterly. And later, perhaps, you shall see me even more clearly. . . .

"But no, Yvala alone dwells here. Save for yourselves there is in this park of mine no living creature. Everything is illusion but myself. And am I not enough? Can you desire anything more of life or death than you gaze on now?"

The query trembled into a music-ridden silence, and they knew that they could not. The heaven-sweet murmur of that voice was speaking sheerest magic, and in the sound of it neither of them was capable of any emotion but worship of the loveliness they faced. It beat out in waves like heat from that incarnate perfection, wrapping them about so that nothing in the universe had existence but Yvala.

Before the glory that blazed in their faces Smith felt adoration pouring out of him as blood gushes from a severed artery. Like life-blood it poured, and like life-blood draining it left him queerly weaker and weaker, as if some essential part of him were gushing away in great floods of intensest worship.

But somewhere, down under the lowest depths of Smith's subconsciousness, a faint disquiet was stirring. He fought it, for it broke the mirror surfaces of his tranced adoration, but he could not subdue it, and by degrees that unease struggled up through layer upon layer of rapt enchantment until it burst through into his conscious mind and the little quiver of it ran disturbingly through the exquisite calm of his trance. It was not an articulate disquiet, but it was somehow bound up with the scarcely seen beasts he had glimpsed—or had he glimpsed?—in the wood. That, and the memory of an old Earth legend which try as he would he could not quite exorcise: the legend of a lovely woman—and men turned into beasts. . . . He could not grasp it, but the elusive memory pricked at him with little pinpoint goads, crying danger so insistently that with infinite reluctance his mind took up the business of thinking once more.

Yvala sensed it. She sensed the lessening in that life-blood gush of rapt adoration poured out upon her loveliness. Her fathomless eyes turned upon his in a blaze of transcendent blueness, and the woods reeled about him at the impact of their light. But somewhere in Smith, under the ultimate layer of conscious thought, under the last quiver of instinct and reflex and animal cravings, lay a bedrock of savage strength which no power he had ever met could wholly overcome, not even this—not even Yvala. Rooted deep in that immovable solidity the little uneasy murmur persisted. "There is something wrong here. I mustn't let her swal-

low me up again—I must know what it is. . . ."

That much he was aware of. Then Yvala turned. With both velvety arms she swept back the curtain of her hair, and all about her in a glory of tangible loveliness blazed out the radiance that dwelt in such terrible intensity here. Smith's whole consciousness snuffed out before it like a blown candle-flame.

REMOTELY, after eons, it seemed, awareness overtook him again. It was not consciousness, but a sort of dumb, blind knowledge of processes going on around him, in him, through him. So an animal might be aware, without any hint of real self-consciousness. But hot above everything else the tranced adoration of sheer beauty was blazing now in the center of his universe, and it was devouring him as a flame devours fuel, sucking out his worship, draining him utterly. Helpless, unbodied, he poured forth adoration into the ravenous blaze that held him; and as he poured it out he felt himself fading, somehow sinking below the level of a human being. In his dumb awareness he made no attempt to understand, but he felt himself—degenerating.

It was as if the insatiable appetite for admiration which consumed Yvala and was consuming him sucked him dry of all humanity. Even his thoughts were sinking now as she drained him, so that he no longer fitted words to his sensations, and his mind ran into figures and pictures below the level of human minds. . . .

He was not tangible. He was a dark, inarticulate memory, bodiless, mindless, full of queer, hungry sensations. . . . He remembered running. He remembered the dark earth flowing backward under his flying feet, wind keen in his nostrils and rife with the odors of a thousand luscious things. He remembered the pack baying around him to the frosty stars, his own voice lifting in exultant, throat-filling clamor with the rest. He remembered the sweetness of flesh yielding under fangs, the hot gush of blood over a hungry tongue. Little more than this he remembered. The ravenous craving, the exultation of the chase, the satisfying reek of hot flesh under ripping fangs — all these circled through his memory round and round, leaving room for little else.

But gradually, in dim, disquieting echoes, another realization strengthened beyond the circle of hunger and feeding. It was an intangible thing, nothing but the faint knowledge that somehow, somewhere, in some remote existence, he had been—different. He was little more than a recollection now, a mind that circled memories of hunting and killing and feeding which some lost body in long-ago distances had performed. But even so—he had once been different. He had——

Sharply through that memory-circle broke the knowledge of presences. With no physical sense was he aware of them, for he possessed no physical senses at all. But his awareness, his dumb, numb mind, knew that they had come—knew what they were. In memory he smelled the rank, blood-stirring scent of man, felt a tongue lolling out over suddenly dripping fangs; remembered hunger gushed up through his sensations.

Now he was blind and formless in a formless void, recognizing these presences only as they impinged upon his. But from the man-presences realization reached out and touched him, knowing his presence, realizing his nearness. They sensed him, lurking hungrily so close. And because they sensed him so vividly, their minds receiving the ravenous impact of his, their brains must have translated that hungry nearness into sight for just an instant; for from somewhere outside the gray void where he existed a voice said clearly,

"Look! Look—no, it's gone now, but

for a minute I thought I saw a wolf. . . ."

The words burst upon his consciousness with all the violence of a gun-blast; for in that instant, he *knew*. He understood the speech the man used, remembered that once it had been his speech—realized what he had become. He knew too that the men, whoever they were, walked into just such danger as had conquered him, and the urgency to warn them surged up in his dumbness. Not until then did he know clearly, with a man's word-thoughts, that he had no being. He was not real—he was only a wolf-memory drifting through the dark. He had been a man. Now he was pure wolf—beast—his soul shorn of its humanity down to the very core of savagery that dwells in every man. Shame flooded over him. He forgot the men, the speech they used, the remembered hunger. He dissolved into a nothingness of wolf-memory and man-shame.

Through the dizziness of that a stronger urge began to beat. Somewhere in the void sounded a call that reached out to him irresistibly. It called him so strongly that his whole dim being whirled headlong in response along currents that swept him helpless into the presence of the summoner.

A blaze was burning. In the midst of the universal emptiness it flamed, calling, commanding, luring him so sweetly that with all his entity he replied, for there was in that burning an element that wrenched at his innermost, deepest-rooted desire. He remembered food—the hot gush of blood, the crunch of teeth on bone, the satisfying solidarity of flesh under his sinking fangs. Desire for it gushed out of him like life itself, draining him—draining him. . . . He was sinking lower, past the wolf level, down and down. . . .

Through the coming oblivion terror stabbed. It was a lightning-flash of realization from his long-lost humanity, one last throb that brightened the dark into which he sank. And out of that bed-rock of unshakable strength which was the core of his being, even below the wolf level, even below the oblivion into which he was being sucked—the spark of rebellion flashed.

Before now he had floundered helplessly with no firmness anywhere to give him foothold to fight; but now, in his uttermost extremity, while the last dregs of conscious life drained out of him, the bed-rock lay bare from which the well-springs of his strength and savagery sprang, and at that last stronghold of the *self* called Smith he leaped into instant rebellion, fighting with all the wolf-nature that had been the soil from which his man-soul rooted. Wolfishly he fought, with a beast's savagery and a man's strength, backed by the bed-rock firmness that was the base for both. Space whirled about him, flaming with hungry fires, black with flashes of oblivion, furious and ravenous in the hot presence of Yvala.

But he was winning. He knew it, and fought harder, and abruptly felt the snap of yielding opposition and was blindingly aware again, blindingly human. He lay on soft moss as a dead man lies, terribly relaxed in every limb and muscle. But life was flowing back into him, and humanity was gushing like a river in spate back into the drained hollows of his soul. For a while he lay quiet, gathering himself into one body again. His hold on it was so feeble that sometimes he thought he was floating clear and had to struggle hard to force re-entrance. Finally, with infinite effort, he tugged his eyelids open and lay there in a deathly quiet, watching.

Before him stood the white marble shrine which housed Beauty. But it was not Yvala's delirious loveliness he gazed on now. He had been through the fire of

her deepest peril, and he saw her now as she really was—not in the form which spelled pure loveliness to him, and, as he guessed, to every being that gazed upon her, whether it be man or beast—not in any form at all, but as a blaze of avid light flaming inside the shrine. The light was alive, quivering and trembling and animate, but it bore no human form. It was not human. It was a life so alien that he wondered weakly how his eyes could ever have twisted it into the incarnate loveliness of Yvala. And even in the depths of his peril he found time to regret the passing of that beauty—that exquisite illusion which had never existed save in his own brain. He knew that as long as life burned in him he could never forget her smile.

It was a thing of some terribly remote origin that blazed here. He guessed that the power of it had fastened on his brain as soon as he came within its scope, commanding him to see it in that lovely form which meant heart's-desire to him alone. It must have done the same thing to countless other beings—he remembered the beast wraiths that had brushed his brain in the forest with the faint, shamed contact of theirs. Well, he had been one of them—he knew now. He understood the warning and the anguish in their eyes. He remembered too the ruins he had seen in the woods. What race had dwelt here once, imposing its civilization and its stamp of quiet glades and trees upon the ravenous forest? A human race, perhaps, dwelling in seclusion under the leaves until Yvala the Destroyer came. Or perhaps not a human race, for he knew now that to every living creature she wore a different form, the incarnation of each individual's highest desire.

Then he heard voices, and after an infinity of effort twisted his head on the moss until he could see whence they came. At what he saw he would have risen if he could, but a deathly weariness lay like the weight of worlds upon him and he could not stir. Those man-presences he had felt in his beast-form stood here—the three slavers from the little ship. They must have followed them not far behind, with what dark motives would never be known now, for Yvala's magic had seized them and there would be no more of humanity for them after the next few moments were past. They stood in a row there before the shrine with an ecstasy almost holy on their faces. Plainly he saw reflected there the incarnate glory of Yvala, though to his eyes the thing they faced was only a formless flame.

He knew then why Yvala had let him go so suddenly in that desperate struggle. Here was fresh fodder for her avidity, new worship to drink in. She had turned away from his outworn well-springs to drain new prey of its humanity. He watched them standing there, drunk with loveliness before what to them must be a beautiful woman veiled in drifting hair, glowing with more than mortal ardency where, to him, only a clear flame burned.

But he could see more. Cloudy about those three figures, rapt before the shrine, he could see—was it some queer reflection of themselves dancing upon the air? The misty outlines wavered as, with eyes that in the light of what he had just passed through had won momentarily a sight which penetrated beyond the flesh, he looked upon that dancing shimmer which clearly must be the reflection of some vital part of those three men, visible now in some strange way at the evocation of Yvala's calling.

They were man-shaped reflections. They strained toward Yvala from their anchorage in the bodies that housed them, yearning, pulling as if they would forsake

their fleshly roots and merge with the incarnate beauty that called them so irresistibly. The three stood rigid, faces blank with rapture, unconscious of that perilous tugging at what must be in their very souls.

Then Smith saw the nearest man sag at the knees, quiver, topple to the moss. He lay still for a moment while from his fallen body that tenuous reflection of himself tugged and pulled and then in one last great effort jerked free and floated like a smoke-wreath into the white-hot intensity in the shrine. The blaze engulfed it, flaring brighter as if at the kindling of new fuel.

When that sudden brightness died again the smoke-wreath drifted out, trailing through the pillars in a form that even to Smith's dimmed eyes wore a strange distortion. It was no longer man-formed. It was no longer a man's soul. All of humanity had burned out from it to feed the blaze that was Yvala. And that beast foundation which lies so close under the veneer of civilization and humanity in every human creature was bared and free. Cold with understanding, Smith watched the core of beast instinct which was all that remained now that the layer of man-veneer had been stripped away, a core of animal memories rooted eons deep in that far-away past when all man's ancestors ran on four paws.

It was a cunning beast that remained, instinct with foxy slyness. He saw the misty thing slink away into the green gloom of the woods, and he realized afresh why it was he had seen fleeting glimpses of animals in the park as he came here, wearing that terrible familiarity in the set of their heads, the line of shoulder and neck that hinted at other gaits than the four-footed. They must have been just such wraiths as this, drifting through the woods, beast-wraiths that wore still the tatters and rags of their doffed humanity, brushing his mind with the impact of theirs until their vividness evoked actual sight of the reality of fur and flesh, just for a glimpse, just for a hint, before the wraith blew past. And he was cold with horror at the thought of how many men must have gone to feed the flame, stripping off humanity like a garment and running now in the nakedness of their beast natures through the enchanted woods.

Here was Circe. He realized it with a quiver of horror and awe. Circe the Enchantress, who turned the men of Greek legend into beasts. And what tremendous backgrounds of reality and myth loomed smokily behind what happened here before his very eyes! Circe the Enchantress—ancient Earthly legend incarnate now on a Jovian moon far away through the void. The awe of it shook him to the depths. Circe—Yvala—alien entity that must, then, rove through the universe and the ages, leaving dim whispers behind her down the centuries. Lovely Circe on her blue Ægean isle—Yvala on her haunted moon under Jupiter's blaze—past and present merged into a blazing whole.

The wonder of it held him so wrapt that when the reality of the scene before him finally bore itself in upon his consciousness again, both of the remaining slavers lay prone upon the moss, forsaken bodies from which the vitality had been sucked like blood into Yvala's flame. That flame burned more rosily now, and out of its pulsing he saw the last dim wraith of the three who had fed her come hurrying, a swinish brute of a wraith whose grunts and snorts were almost audible, tusks and bristles all but visible as it scurried off into the wood.

Then the flame burned clear again, flushed with hot rose, pulsing with regular beats like the pulse of a heart, satiate

and ecstatic in its shrine. And he was aware of a withdrawal, as if the consciousness of the entity that burned here were turned inward upon itself, leaving the world it dominated untouched as Yvala drowsed and digested the sustenance her vampire-craving for worship had devoured.

SMITH stirred a little on the moss. Now, if ever, he must make some effort to escape, while the thing in the shrine was replete and uninterested in its surroundings. He lay there, shaken with exhaustion, forcing strength back into his body, willing himself to be strong, to rise, to find Yarol, to make his way somehow back to the deserted ship. And by slow degrees he succeeded. It took a long while, but in the end he had dragged himself up against a tree and stood swaying, his pale eyes alternately clouding with exhaustion and blinking awake again as he scanned the space under the trees for Yarol.

The little Venusian lay a few steps away, one cheek pressing the ground and his yellow curls gay against the moss. With closed eyes he looked like a seraph asleep, all the lines of hard living and hard fighting relaxed and the savageness of his dark gaze hidden. Even in his deadly peril Smith could not suppress a little grin of appreciation as he staggered the half-dozen steps that parted them and fell to his knees beside his friend's body.

The sudden motion dazed him, but in a moment his head cleared and he laid an urgent hand on Yarol's shoulder, shaking it hard. He dared not speak, but he shook the litle Venusian heavily, and in his brain a silent call went out to whatever drifting wraith among the trees housed Yarol's naked soul. He bent over the quiet yellow head and called and called, turning the force of his determination in all its intensity to that summoning, while weakness washed over him in great slow waves.

After a long time he thought he felt a dim response, somewhere from far off. He called harder, eyes turned apprehensively toward the rosily pulsing flame in the shrine, wondering if this voiceless summoning might not impinge upon the entity there as tangibly as speech. But Yvala's satiety must have been deep, and there was no changing in the blaze.

The answer came clearer from the woods. He felt it pulling in toward him along the strong compulsion of his call as a fisherman feels a game fish yielding at last to the tug of his line. And presently among the leafy solitudes of the trees a little mist-wraith came gliding. It was a slinking thing, feline, savage, fearless. He could have sworn that for the briefest instant he saw the outlines of a panther stealing across the moss, misty, low-slung, turning upon him the wise black gaze of Yarol—exactly his friend's black eyes, with no lessening in them of lost humanity. And something in that familiar gaze sent a little chill down his back. Could it be—could it possibly be that in Yarol the veneer of humanity was so thin over his savage cat-nature that even when it had been stripped away the look in his eyes was the same?

Then the smoke-beast was hovering over the prone Venusian figure. It curled round Yarol's shoulders for an instant; it faded and sank, and Yarol stirred on the moss. Smith turned him over with a shaking hand. The long Venusian lashes quivered, lifted. Black, sidelong eyes looked up into Smith's pale gaze. And Smith in a gush of chilly uncertainty did not know if humanity had returned into his friend's body or not, if it was a panther's gaze looking up into his or if that thin layer of man-soul veiled it, for Yarol's eyes had always looked like this.

"Are—are you all right?" he choked in a breathless whisper.

Yarol blinked dizzily once or twice, then grinned. A twinkle lighted up his black cat gaze. He nodded and made a little effort to rise. Smith helped him sit up. The Venusian was not a fraction so weak as the Earthman had been. After a little interval of hard breathing he struggled to his feet and helped Smith up, apprehension in his whole demeanor as he eyed the flame that pulsed in its white shrine. He jerked his head urgently.

"Let's get out of here!" his silent lips mouthed. And Smith in fervent agreement turned in the direction he indicated, hoping that Yarol knew where he was going. His own exhaustion was still too strong to permit him anything but acquiescence.

They made their way through the woods, Yarol heading unerringly in a swerveless course toward the roadway they had left such a long time ago. After a while, when the flame-housing shrine had vanished among the trees behind them, the Venusian's soft voice murmured, half to itself.

"——wish, almost, you hadn't called me back. Woods were so cool and still—remembering such splendid things—killing and killing—taste of hot blood—I wish——"

The voice fell quiet again. But Smith, stumbling on beside his friend, understood. He knew why the woods seemed familiar to Yarol, so that he could head for the roadway unerringly. He knew why Yvala in her satiety had not even wakened at the withdrawal of Yarol's humanity—it was so small a thing that the loss of it meant nothing. He gained a new insight in that moment into Venusian nature that he remembered until the day he died.

Then there was a gap in the trees ahead, and Yarol's shoulder was under his supportingly, and the road to safety shimmered in its tree-arched green gloom ahead.

Salvage

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

Like broken windows in a ruined house
  These sightless sockets stare; this gaping jaw
Provides a doorway where a scampering mouse
  May carry thistledown and moss, and gnaw
The sedge-grass into soft and pliant strands
  To fashion in this skull a cozy nest,
And there retire, when Nature's law commands,
  To bear her young. Time had a merry jest
With this bleached skull, where thought was once enthroned,
  And pride and solemn dignity held sway.
But wait! An empty skull that *you* once owned
  May house a lot of squeaking mice some day!

"Medill allowed himself to settle into the coma of concentration."

Wife of the Dragon-Fly

By PAUL ERNST

An unusual weird-scientific story of a savant who used his will-power over insects to spy on his wife

AT THE sound of his wife's voice, Medill Corey turned back on the stairs. He turned reluctantly, angry that she had seen him going up to his workroom. He had hoped to get there unobserved.

"You're not going to work again today, are you?" Beatrice Corey repeated, as Medill reached the bottom step and stood staring at her.

She looked almost ill. Her face was paler, thinner than ever. Her eyes

were without luster in their wan hollows.

"Yes," said Medill, "I'm going up and work."

His pale cold eyes played over her face, feasting on the signs of her distress. His thin lips writhed a little with icy pleasure.

He had her guessing, all right. And the mystery of it was killing her by inches. Good! It served her right for daring to be attracted by another man.

"You know Doctor Voight said you should have a complete rest," Beatrice Corey murmured. "You mustn't concentrate so hard on these experiments—whatever they are."

"Don't you wish you knew what they were?" Medill mocked.

Beatrice cowered back from him. But with pity in her eyes she stared at the thin, brittle-looking man of forty she had married six years ago.

Medill's teeth showed behind his thin lips in a positive snarl. This frequent pity of hers—this mute statement of her eyes that he was a poor deluded creature who only hurt himself with his cold jealous rages—spurred him intolerably. He lashed out in an effort to hurt her even more.

" 'No, Doctor Voight,' " he quoted slowly and deliberately, " 'I married Medill in good faith. I'll carry on with him, no matter how hard it is.' "

"Medill!"

It was barely more than a whisper that left Beatrice's lips—a whisper of horror, of almost superstitious dread.

"You didn't know I'd heard you with your precious doctor in the summer house yesterday, did you?" said Medill.

"If you heard us," replied Beatrice, "you know you have nothing to be jealous of."

"No? You're in love with Doctor Voight, my precious wife! You may be faithful to me physically, but mentally and spiritually you belong to the worthy doctor. Isn't that something to be jealous of?"

His wife ignored his words, and his tone. One large, fearful wonder took all her mind.

"How in God's name could you have heard us in the summer house?"

Medill laughed. The laugh was more chilling than an angry tirade would have been. His thin, dry hand tightened on the newel-post.

"Quite a problem, isn't it?" he said. "The summer house is set by itself in plain lawn. There is no shelter for an eavesdropper for fifty feet in all directions. Not even any trees around. And you and my fine doctor were whispering. Yet I heard every word. 'But you don't love Medill,' he had the insolence to say to you. 'You've gone through six years of hell with him. Leave him, and come to me.' "

"Have you some sort of telephone arrangement concealed in the summer house?" said Beatrice. She was a little more calm. But deep in her eyes remained the formless dread, the well-nigh superstitious terror, that had haunted them lately whenever they rested on her husband's bony face.

"No, my love," taunted Medill. "There is no dictaphone hidden there, or anything of that sort. But don't let me detain you. You are to meet the doctor at the gate in half an hour. I'll get to my work and leave you two alone in sweet privacy."

"Medill!" Beatrice caught his hand. "Whatever else you may believe—you must believe this: I mean to stick out this marriage contract as I took oath to do, and part of that is to care for your health. Doctor Voight has said you were headed for a nervous breakdown if you didn't stop your mysterious, secret experiment-

ing. Please, please don't go to your workroom——"

Medill roughly jerked his hand away.

"A lot you'd care if I dropped dead this minute!" he snarled. "Hypocrite! Go and meet your doctor at the gate. But remember this—wherever you are and no matter how low you pitch your voices, I can hear and see everything."

He went back up the stairs; and Beatrice, after a pause, turned and walked toward the front door. Her fine face was stiff with fatigue and a nameless fear. Her unsteady gait was that of an old woman, though she was barely thirty.

At the top of the stairs, Medill peered back. He nodded grimly as he saw his wife going out onto the porch. Moving quickly on his long thin legs, he fairly scuttled to the back of the house where he had had a small bedroom padded for silence, equipped with an extra stout door, and made into a library-workroom.

Once inside this, he closed the heavy door and locked it. There were two big locks. He fastened them both with anxious caution: his wife feared and loathed all insects; he dared not risk her entering this room for this reason, as well as for others equally important.

In the room was a big table, a comfortable armchair, and, lining the walls, many bookcases. A smaller case was set by the table filled with books that were all little known, all on speculative aspects of psychology and physiology. One book was out of the case and lying on the table. This was titled *Will to Power over the Involuntary Muscles*. The author was Medill Corey.

But when Medill had seated himself before the table, his pale eyes glittering almost feverishly, he opened none of the books. Instead he unlocked the table drawer and took out a small box, with air-holes in it, which he handled with great care. His breath sounded audibly in the quiet room as he opened the box. If its occupant had been harmed in any way, or had bruised its wings, an irritating delay would be caused while he caught something else to take its place.

However, the thing in the box was all right in spite of its confinement. It flew out like a flash of light—a big dragon-fly, darting here and there in the room, hovering but to dart again, like a flying darning-needle on almost invisible wings.

A sigh of relief hissed from Medill's lips. He took his watch from his pocket and propped it on the table in front of him. Doctor Voight was to come at three o'clock. For weeks, since Medill's slowly failing health had first brought the doctor here—to meet and fall deeply in love with Beatrice—he had come at three in the afternoon, punctually. There was no reason to suppose he would be late or early today. So, at three, Medill wanted to be at the gate of his country estate to witness the meeting between them.

Medill waited till a quarter of three. He had learned from past experience that it took roughly ten minutes to make a transition. If he left this room at five minutes of three it would be about right.

He prepared for the change with an involuntary shudder. No one knew better than he himself the peril he faced. A few minutes delay in re-entering the mortal shell he had learned to leave, would be fatal. Irreparable coagulation of the stilled blood-stream would set in. . . .

Tensely staring at the dragon-fly, which was at the moment beating its wings against the window-pane, Medill allowed himself to settle into the coma of concentration that accompanied his eery experiments. Like a stone image he sat before the table, eyes glazed and vacant, all

his power of mind and will centered on his chest—the left side of his chest, for he was willing his heart to stop.

Beat, beat, beat, beat.

His pulse was rapid, as it always was at first. The tensity of effort required, the enormity of the thing he was about to do, always set his heart to racing a hundred to the minute—at first. That pace would change gradually till it reached an incredibly slow count—until finally there was no count at all.

Beat, beat, beat.

Slower, and again slower.

When your heart stops, you die. All science tells you that. And the first time Medill had succeeded in his experiment of stopping his own heart he would have died, too—only, by the grace of heaven, there had chanced to be a beetle in the room—an ordinary, blundering June-bug that had bumbled into the place before the screens had been put up for full summer. That had saved his life, or, rather, his living intelligence. And it had also shown him, by pure accident, the transitionary power that could—*must*, indeed—accompany his achievement of temporary death. The living intelligence, spark of life, soul stuff, whatever you want to call it, must have a house of flesh or it perished.

Beat, beat.

Very slow, now. Thirty or so to the minute. But in the final stages it would be much slower yet. So slow, so very slow, just before the end, that thousands could be counted between beats. Medill had given a lot of thought to that. He had decided that in addition to the actual slowing of the heart, time itself must race faster for small forms of life than for humans. It would have to: otherwise insects could not live out their full span in a few hours.

Beat. . . .

A knife could have been jabbed into Medill's flesh without his feeling it. His eyes remained wide open, unblinking. He was absolutely still. Even the throbbing of his pulse at wrist and throat could no longer be seen.

Beat. . . .

The dragon-fly left the window-pane as though at last convinced it could not fly through the glass. It flew toward the table. But it flew reluctantly, now and then darting away from the stone-like figure of the man as if jerking against the pull of an invisible thread.

Finally, after many hoverings in mid-air, the iridescent thing lit on the table. To be exact, it lit on the book, *Will to Power over the Involuntary Muscles.* Then, in a steady short flight, it darted to the paling mask that was Medill's face. It hovered over the sagging head, and at length settled down on the finely wrinkled skin over the right temple.

Beat. . . .

That was the last. Medill's heart was definitely stilled. No pulse, no respiration, no movement. He was dead—a pallid, slowly chilling corpse seated bolt upright in the chair before the work table.

On wings so swiftly moving that they could scarcely be seen, the dragon-fly flashed from the forehead of the corpse to the door. Under this there was a crack about half an inch high; and down the hall there was a partly opened window, with a hole in its screen.

With its thousands of eyes giving a peculiar luster and depth to every object they perceived, it lit on the floor near the threshold and wobbled on ungainly legs to the crack under the door. The edge of the rug was a four-foot wall. The dragon-fly clambered clumsily down it. Winged things are very helpless on their feet. But this creature was less awkward, at that, than the grasshopper that had left this room yesterday.

Once under the door and out in the hall, the dragon-fly flashed like a streak of light to the window and out the hole in the screen. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! With infinite patience and skill, Medill Corey had experimented with blood corpuscles and living body cells till he had ascertained the longest period over which the dead body could be left by its directing soul. He had found that the safe limit was approximately ten minutes. If the dragon-fly was not back on the dead man's right temple within ten minutes . . .

A tremor ran through the dragon-fly's wings. This must be the last transition. Each one brought with it a terrible danger that the body might not be re-tenanted before the time-limit was up. Each one worked terrific hardship on a body already damaged by a dozen little deaths.

To die, and release the soul for escape into another living shell! That was sublime! But to use the somber discovery for the purpose of tricking a wife was monumental stupidity. Medill knew that; he admitted it even while he did it. After today some safer way must be found of breaking the spirit that had always maddened his egomania.

But now—hurry! Out to the gate, to spy on the meeting between Doctor Voight and Beatrice. Then her patient endurance could be further bruised by more quoting of what they had said and done when they thought they were alone. The most exquisite and refined torture, it was!

The wings of the dragon-fly were a mere blur as it hurtled through the summer afternoon.

Medill's house was set on more than an acre of land, mainly lawn. The gate was fifty yards from the house, and near it were no trees or shrubs of any kind—no shelter for eavesdroppers. The two would feel safe there.

The dragon-fly reached the gate on glittering wings just as Doctor Voight's old touring-car paused in the road outside. Beatrice was already there, waiting. She was leaning wearily against one of the gate-posts, her face pale and worn, her eyes closed.

DOCTOR VOIGHT, a slender but strong-looking man with an iron-gray mustache and Vandyke beard, got from his car and stepped quickly to her side. He caught her right hand silently in his.

The dragon-fly, which had been hovering not far from Beatrice's head in the motionless way such insects have, darted forward with a whining of wings. Beatrice had not even opened her eyes at the hand-clasp, which indicated an infuriating communion of mind and spirit between her and the doctor.

"Darling," Doctor Voight said in a low tone, his eyes expressing infinite tenderness and sympathy.

At the word, Beatrice Corey opened her eyes quickly.

"Ssh! You mustn't say things like that. You must say nothing you would not want my husband to hear, because he hears everything we say."

Doctor Voight glanced around out of keen gray eyes.

"Nonsense, my dear. How could anybody be near enough to hear us in this spot?" His thin, strong fingers clasped hers more tightly. "You are letting your nerves run away with you."

"Am I? What would you say if I told you Medill had overheard us yesterday in the summer house?"

The doctor stared. "I would say it was impossible."

"Nevertheless, he did hear us." Beatrice leaned more wearily yet against the post. "A moment ago he mocked me by repeating, word for word, some of our talk together."

"The sneak! The contemptible spy! He has wired the summer house——" He broke off to wave his hand abstractedly at a large dragon-fly that had dashed erratically at his eyes.

"But he didn't," said Beatrice. "He swore there was nothing like that concealed there. And I believe him."

"Then, how——" muttered the doctor.

The dragon-fly had flown away from his face and was shimmering up and down in the golden air.

"Beatrice," said Voight, "you've got to get away from here. Medill Corey is a great man in the world of science, but in the world of human relations he is a monster. I have known his kind before: strong of will, but so narrow that they can't stand to have another strong will near them. Your will is strong, darling, but it will break before many days. I can see the break coming."

Beatrice sighed, and trembled a little.

"Pack your things and come with me," begged the doctor. "You can stay with my sister till a divorce is arranged. . . . What's wrong?"

"That thing!" exclaimed Beatrice. "That dragon-fly! It almost brushed my face."

The doctor smashed at the thing with his hat, but it retreated to a safe distance.

"That is only one example of the wrong Corey is doing you," he declared quietly. "With your phobia against insects, you should never be made to live in a country house. Your place is in town. Corey knows that—and only keeps you here to torture you."

White-faced but resolute, Beatrice shook her head.

"I am going to stay with him. I married him for better or worse, and I meant the words."

"I admire your loyalty, but I think you're being unwise. You love me, don't you?"

"I—I can't——"

"Say it! You know you do. Give me the comfort of letting me hear you say it!"

Beatrice closed her eyes again. The dragon-fly darted very near, and hovered on almost invisible wings like a tiny, flying dagger.

"I love you," Beatrice whispered at last, with a sob in her voice. "There! But I must never say it again. I must never even think it again——"

The dragon-fly darted in the direction of the distant house, paused to look backward out of its bulging eyes at the two by the gate, then went on.

"I love you."

The wings of the dragon-fly beat the air with a shrill, angry whine as it sped toward the hall window where was the hole in the screen.

"I love you."

So she had got to the point of admitting in words that she loved the man. She had said it! She, wife of a scientist brilliant beyond the comprehension of a dozen Doctor Voights! She would suffer for that.

The many-faceted eyes of the dragon-fly brought out marvelous hues of red and blue in the grass and foliage which showed only uniform green to human eyes, but it did not see them. And it did not see other, less peaceful things. . . .

Only pure reflex action, residing in the needle-like body apart from all intelligence, saved the dragon-fly. It made the shimmering creature stop as if it had hit a stone wall—just as a great feathered lightning-bolt swooped with snapping beak at the spot where the dragon-fly would have been in another instant of sustained flight. A sparrow!

The dragon-fly darted toward the tree

set at the rear of the Corey house. After it came the monster, wheeling as it wheeled, doubling back and from side to side as it did.

Fear, such as no human ever has occasion to know, gave added speed to the dragon-fly's wings. Insects live in a world of unspeakable nightmare. But in that world were few terrors more fearful than birds.

One last desperate rush the dragon-fly made. Then it folded its wings and dropped like a bullet to the lower branch of the tree, where it clung quaking to the under side of a leaf. The sparrow, huge as a Martin bomber, winged gigantically overhead for awhile, but finally flew away.

The next move of the dragon-fly was made more in frenzied haste than in wisdom. Hurry! Hurry! The time limit must be nearly up when it must light on the forehead of the corpse!

It dropped from the leaf, flashed into streaking flight — and plunged straight into a maze of sticky cables that looked to be made of rainbow-colored, flexible glass. A spider-web!

The dragon-fly had fled in terror before. The emotion that now set its wings to vibrating in a shrill whine of futile power went beyond anything for which there are words.

Hurry! Hurry! Another few minutes and it would be too late! It *must* get back to the pallid, chilling body in the workroom! And here it was tangled in this web of death stretching from twig to twig in the lower branch!

The keening of the dragon-fly's wings rose in pitch. But still its legs were held by the broken lengths of web. And now the wings themselves caught and smeared, clinging helplessly to the cables, sticking impotently to each other.

Abruptly, when every instinct and fiber shrieked for further struggle, the dragon-fly went moveless, feigning death. There was a way in which the study might yet be re-entered in time. It involved something undreamed of before—but there was a possibility. . . .

So the dragon-fly hung like a dead thing, wings and legs tangled and smeared, a broken travesty of the flashing bit of life it had been a moment before. And after a few seconds the web trembled a bit, though there was no breeze to shake its supporting branches.

A tremor ran through the iridescent wings. A short distance away was a great, hairy thing with deadly eyes and powerful, hairy legs. A nightmare thing —the spider that had engineered this web.

The web trembled yet more as the bloated body was sent closer on crooked legs toward its enmeshed prey. And the dragon-fly could only hang there and stare, with a myriad magnifying lenses, at the horror approaching it.

The spider reached the dragon-fly and crouched beside it for an instant as if gloating over its helplessness. Then, with incredible swiftness, it pounced.

The dragon-fly felt terrific pain—felt death. But even in that flashing instant it felt, too, terrific triumph. For the spider, in taking life, was losing existence! Death, it seemed, could release the soul in another body whether the death were accidental or deliberately willed by a stopped heart!

The hairy, revolting body of the spider was propelled by its crooked, powerful legs down the tree trunk and through the towering jungle of the lawn to the wall of the house. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Perhaps even now it was too late. But by a last burst of speed the study might be reached in time.

At the white wall of the house the spider paused. Great white expanse stretch-

ing up to heaven before the dull but vicious eyes . . . distance too great to make windows even visible, let alone identifiable . . . how in the name of heaven could the hall window, with the priceless hole in the screen, be found?

The spider started clambering up the wall at random, each clapboard presenting a gigantic problem in navigation, each fluttering web of other spiders a trap to be meticulously avoided. Any further delay would assuredly be fatal. A fight with another spider, no matter how brief, would definitely kill the last trace of a hope already slim.

Speed! Speed!

Here was a window, partly opened. And the screen. . . .

The spider scuttled back and forth over the screen, back and forth and up and down. There was no hole. This was not the window.

But through the screen the staring eyes of the spider saw something that froze it stone-still for an instant. A wide table, with an armchair set before it. A dead man in the chair. Beyond, a door broken from its hinges; and a man and woman hurrying toward the corpse.

The spider's legs blurred with the rapidity of their action. The hairy body left the surface of the screen and darted along its upper edge. At one end the frame was warped away from the window-sash a little. A very little!

No true spider would have forced itself through such a narrow crack. But this one did, crushing body and legs, almost scraping one eye out, but eventually landing heavily on the inside of the window-sill. From there the spider dropped to the floor and scuttled painfully on trailing legs to the armchair.

"He's dead," Doctor Voight was saying, as he leaned over the stark body. "Your slavery is ended, Beatrice."

"Dead?" whispered the woman. "Dead! Oh, thank God!"

The task of hoisting its heavy body up the chair-leg and up along the sleeve of the dead man seemed surely beyond the power of the shattered spider. But at the woman's words a shiver seemed to go through it; and the trailing legs began tortuously lifting its bulk.

Dead, eh? And Beatrice thanked God for it! Well, Doctor Voight would have the surprize of his professional life in a moment! For the spider was up on the chair-arm now, still unnoticed; and the immense disk of the watch, propped on the desk, was visible. Only twelve minutes had passed since the dragon-fly had left the room. It had seemed far longer than that.

Only twelve minutes! The corpse could still almost certainly come to life. Once let the hairy, bloated body come to rest on the dead forehead and Beatrice would see how much God was to be thanked!

THE spider climbed the dead man's coat-sleeve. It went faster now. Much faster. The rough fabric offered swifter footing than the smooth chair-leg.

"It must have been heart failure," the doctor was saying. "His heart and circulatory system were in bad shape—though I'm ashamed to say I couldn't find exactly what was wrong. His trouble baffled diagnosis."

The spider raced over the dead man's shoulder. The wide white strip of the starched collar, and the gray expanse of the dead cheek, loomed just above it.

"Anyhow, he's dead," Doctor Voight went on. "And you are at last going to live a sane, healthy life. A happy one, too, I hope—with me?"

"So happy!" murmured Beatrice. "So very happy! I should be sorry . . . for this." She nodded toward the corpse.

"But I can't be—not and be honest. You don't know a tenth of the things he did to me. I was afraid to let you know, afraid you would kill him."

The spider skimmed up the dead gray cheek.

Making love literally over a dead man! Mouthing sweet nothings with death in the room! Let them look out when the dead man came to life! Beatrice especially. She'd wish she had never been born! There were ways, without ever a hand being touched to them, of making persons into stark lunatics in a few months. The author of *Will to Power over the Involuntary Muscles* knew such ways.

The spider raced down into the hollowed eyesocket, up again, and around the tangle of the eyelashes.

"We'll travel awhile till you forget this house of cruelty and tragedy," the doctor said. "And then we'll come back to normality and work. Unless you'd rather we moved to some other town?"

"No, your practise is here."

The spider skirted around the bushy eyebrow sprouting from the clammy skin. The goal was only a few inches away. Thank God he's dead, eh? She'd be praying God for her own death soon!

"You do love me, Beatrice?" said the doctor, his fine eyes looking deep into hers.

"With all my heart. . . . Oh—look—*smash it!*"

The spider reached the chill forehead just as Doctor Voight, smiling a little at Beatrice's fear, brushed it off.

It plopped on the table top. In an instant it was scurrying frantically back toward the dead body.

"Kill it! Kill it!" beseeched Beatrice. "Loathsome, hairy thing!"

Doctor Voight raised the book, *Will to Power*, and poised it above the toiling spider.

And the spider stopped!

Yes, yes, yes! Kill it! For once again death could release the spirit that otherwise could return to its human shell only by actual contact with the right temple. When that book came crashing down, the dead would live again!

But Doctor Voight, with a laugh, tossed the book aside.

"It would make a mess on the table top," he said.

He slid a piece of paper under the spider, carried it to the window, raised the screen and dropped it carelessly out.

In the jungle of the lawn, the pulped and broken spider stared dully up at the white expanse of the house wall, which seemed to stretch to heaven. Impossible to scale that wall again. Impossible. . . .

The spider twitched spasmodically, and lay still.

The Man Who Would Not Die

By FRANK OWEN

The strange story of a sea-captain who was twice murdered, and the curious fate that befell his murderer

TWICE Jan Breedon had committed murder and both times he had killed the same man. The affair bothered him. Breedon was not a born killer. True, he had a vicious temper, easily aroused; but as a rule he curbed his passions before they got him into difficulties that would be followed by prison sentences.

He had not meant to kill Lee Grandon, but the job was done and it was too late for apologies.

The trouble had started in a notorious gambling-resort in Macao, that accursed port that stands out like a festering fever-sore on the lips of China. The gambling-house had been kept by Zaneen, a crafty little man of Portuguese and Chinese extraction with a dash of French for good measure.

Zaneen was as evil as his house, but he was a born host. He knew how to make his guests feel at home. Cards, women, perfume and whisky were blended together to make a tasty broth. His house, *The Singapore Hotel*, was ill-lighted. All the figures that moved about in it seemed like ghosts. Over each gambling-table was suspended a dim-lit lantern. Back in the shadows slender girls crept about with dark lustrous eyes and alluring lips. Usually they appeared at the exact moment when a guest was proclaiming vociferously about his losses at cards. Thereafter his voice continued, but in a key far more moderate.

That night Jan Breedon had played a game in one of the private rooms upstairs. There were only three men seated at the table. One was Gustafson, a Swedish seaman who had more forehead and less intelligence than any other frequenter of *The Singapore*. The other player was Lee Grandon, captain of the tramp steamer, *Banzai*.

Lee Grandon had been slightly drunk. He was quarrelsome. Breedon, who was a past master at card-manipulation, made the fatal error of fumbling as he dealt. Immediately Lee Grandon had sprung to his feet, overturning the table and almost petrifying Gustafson, the moron, who slunk whimpering into a corner.

Without pausing for a moment, Lee's arm shot out and caught Jan Breedon flush on the jaw. He went down as though he had been hit by a sledge-hammer. The room swam dizzily about him but with almost superhuman effort he fought to save himself from losing consciousness. Like a being without reason, Lee Grandon stood over him. His eyes were blood-shot with fury. Cheating at cards was the worst sin in the decalog, according to his way of reasoning. Lee Grandon was not particularly worried

"It was easy to forget Grandon when he had so magnificent a face to gaze upon."

about whether or not he fought fair. He had come from a long line of seamen. Many of his ancestors had been smugglers. The sea was in his blood.

As Jan Breedon lay on the floor struggling to rise, he beheld Lee Grandon draw back his foot as though he were about to kick him. He knew that kick would send him to a hospital, perhaps to his grave. With an oath, Jan Breedon drew his gun and fired once. The foot stopped in midair. Lee Grandon toppled over without a murmur. The bullet had caught him right between the eyes.

In horror Jan Breedon staggered to his feet. He rushed to the open window and dropped to the ground. Before morning he had left Macao on a tramp steamer. Once out of port, he knew he was safe. Zaneen would make no dis-

turbance. It would not be the first time he had found it convenient to dispose of a body that had ceased to be of use. Zaneen had no desire to get into difficulties with the authorities. Nor had the authorities any desire to prosecute him. *The Singapore Hotel* was a pleasant place wherein to loiter when the nights were wearisome. The wine was good, the girls were slender.

DURING the next few months, Jan Breedon drifted about from one steamer to another. He usually signed on for a single voyage. He was restless, nervous, haunted by the fact that he had killed a man. Jan Breedon was cursed with a conscience. He had too vivid an imagination. Once in a café in Batavia he had heard a man speak. The voice had sounded like that of Lee Grandon.

As soon as possible he booked passage on a ship for Singapore. He drank heavily to forget. By day he was able to quiet his nerves, but the nights were awful. When he was on shore he always slept with a light burning beside him. On shipboard this was impossible. The other seamen wouldn't stand for it. Night after night he lay staring with hollow eyes into the velvet blackness. Even on those occasions when he had to stand watch, his nerves were flayed to ribbons. Why was there so strange a coldness in the air? It seemed like a wind that had blown through a tomb. And the water lapping against the side of the ship seemed like the moans of the restless dead.

One day as he walked through the streets of Penang, he received a shock that almost unbalanced him completely; for walking along the street was Lee Grandon. He seemed in the best of health. Yet he was dead. He had been dead for weeks. Jan Breedon imagined he could even see the mark between the eyes where the bullet from his gun had plowed through his brain. Jan Breedon staggered so, he almost fell. At the moment he needed a drink. Fortunately he had a flask of whisky in his back pocket. He took a long hard swig of it. Already that day he had drunk an immense quantity of liquor. He decided that he would get blind-drunk. There was no better way to drown sorrow. So he went to a grog-shop owned by Charley Tzu, who prided himself that he was half English.

Charley had been born in London's famous Limehouse. His mother had been an Irish waitress who eventually amassed a fortune because she was able to supply her patrons with food they liked. She was a big, bluff, boisterous woman who strode through Limehouse with the arrogance of a queen. And somewhere along the way she acquired a husband, Tom Tzu, who dealt in porcelains and tea and occasionally a few pounds of opium. With such parents and in such an environment it was quite easy for Charley Tzu to pick up a smattering of education, with an over-emphasis on cupidity and shrewdness. Eventually he had drifted to the Orient and opened his establishment in Penang. He was still in the same business as his mother and his father, with numerous ramifications. He still occasionally sold tea and porcelain; though when he sold opium it was in far smaller quantities. At Charley Tzu's bar was sold forgetfulness. In the room beyond was sold oblivion. It was Charley's desire to please all customers. His rates were not high for the solace he dispensed. That is why his place was so often frequented by seafaring men. Whenever Jan Breedon was in town that was where he did his thirst-trading.

But now as he stood at the bar and gulped huge quantities of whisky, he could not get drunk. The liquor failed completely. He might have been drink-

ing water for all the strength it had. His eyes were hot and bloodshot. He could not banish the face of Lee Grandon from his consciousness. The reflection seemed imbedded in his eyes as though they were mirrors.

Charley Tzu sidled over to him. "What's the matter?" he asked casually. "You look as though you had seen a ghost."

"I did," cried Jan Breedon hoarsely. "And I cannot forget it."

Charley Tzu tapped him on the arm and smiled. "Beyond yon door," he said, "there are no ghosts to trouble you. If there are spirits, they are friendly ones."

Jan Breedon seized Charley's wrist with such force his fingers bit into the flesh like steel talons. Charley only smiled.

"Take me into that room," Jan Breedon implored.

Charley shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he agreed laconically as he gently released the quivering fingers.

Without another word he led the way through the doorway. The door opened at his approach. The room in which Jan Breedon now found himself was shrouded in semi-darkness. In the center of the room a tiny shriveled Chinaman was working, preparing long bamboo pipes with the tiny bowl in which a pill of rolled opium was to be inserted. As he rolled the tiny gummy pellets into satisfactory roundness he placed them in a symmetrical row along a porcelain slab.

CHARLEY TZU led Jan Breedon to a rude divan in one secluded corner of the room. There were numerous similar bunks around him, on some of which seemingly lifeless forms were sprawled.

"Wait here," Charley directed. Then he withdrew.

A few minutes later a slim girl walked over to Jan Breedon. She was Chinese, and her face shone golden in the feeble light. She held out to him a pipe which was already lighted. Then she crouched down beside him as he inhaled a few whiffs of the drug.

The girl was not good-looking. Her features were ill-formed and her lips were heavily painted. About her mouth there was the suggestion of a sneer as though she looked down on this white man. But to Jan Breedon she seemed a vision of loveliness. As he gazed at her it seemed as though she were peering down at him through an azure mist. It was easy to forget Lee Grandon when he had so magnificent a face to gaze upon. At last he lost consciousness.

His sleep was restless. He tossed and turned as though endeavoring to escape a thousand grasping hands. Gone was the girl of dazzling beauty. Beside him sat an old hag. She drooled at the mouth, and when she wiped her lips he noticed her fangs of teeth. She was laughing softly at his agony. Now his tongue was burning. He could scarcely breathe. All air had been drawn from the room. He was in a complete vacuum, panting, tossing, moaning, gasping helplessly. And it seemed as though thousands of insects were crawling under his skin. With a shriek, he leaped from the divan. He made as though he would seize the old hag and throttle her, so evil did she look. But now there was no one there.

In the center of the room, the old Chinaman still worked endlessly at his task, molding death into little black pearls. Jan Breedon staggered across the room. He stumbled over a divan which loomed in his path. Some uncanny power made him gaze into the face of the man who was sleeping there. It was Captain Grandon. With an oath, Jan Breedon drew a long knife and struck twice. Captain Grandon did not move. Without a murmur, he succumbed to the fu-

tility of life. He would never be able to swallow anything again. The old Chinaman had not been disturbed by the incident. He went on placidly working with his long slim fingers.

Drunkenly Jan Breedon staggered from the place, tears streaming from his eyes. He felt weak, completely exhausted. He returned to his hotel and gathered his few belongings together. Then he lay hidden in a notorious resort until the first train of the day left for Taiping. The journey took three hours, which to him seemed like years. Every passenger who got on board he was suspicious of. Intently he listened to their voices, alert to hear the voice of Captain Grandon. Of course Grandon was dead. He had killed him. But he had killed him once before; yet that had not prevented him from talking and walking about as though he still found life pleasurable. But this time, thanks to the knife, Grandon had been left in a condition that would render talking at least difficult.

The months that followed were devoted entirely to fleeing from imagined pursuers. Now Jan Breedon seldom went to sea. He was afraid of the voices of the water, though they were no worse than the whispering voices of the swamp. His descent was rapid; yet strangely enough he was able to earn some measure of money. He knew the Orient like a native. He acted as guide to venturesome tourists, and usually he emerged from these adventures with far more money than his agreed fee.

He decided that he would stay away from the seaport towns; yet when he went inland he was unhappy. The sea was in his blood. So often had he gone down to the sea in ships he felt a kinship with them. When he was away from the docks he was unhappy. He knew that he ought to leave the Orient, but somehow he couldn't tear himself away. Not for twenty years had he been home. He had a wife and two children somewhere in Europe, but he gave no more thought to them than if they had never existed. He was a thoroughly bad character and now he had become vicious. He attached himself to everyone like a leech. No beggar of Canton ever could have whined so pitifully.

Finally one day he drifted back to Macao. He wanted to visit *The Singapore Hotel*. Like many other criminals, he desired morbidly to visit the scene of his first crime.

Zaneen smiled as he noticed Jan Breedon slinking in, but there was little of friendliness behind that smile. Jan Breedon looked as though he were on his way to the scaffold. His hands felt as cold as ice. His legs seemed so weak he marveled that he could keep his feet. And yet there was something weirdly fascinating about walking once more through the rooms of *The Singapore*. When for a moment his eyes met those of Zaneen and Zaneen nodded to him in greeting, he felt much relieved. At least he had nothing to fear from the one man in Macao who could have caused him trouble. Jan Breedon sat down at a table and ordered a cognac. Zaneen wandered over and sat down for a moment beside him.

"So you're back again," he said.

"I suppose you're surprized," Jan Breedon managed to whisper huskily.

"No, not exactly. After all, why should you have kept away? These little shooting affrays happen occasionally. They are unfortunate, but I have grown to think of them as purely a matter of business routine. You have nothing to fear from the authorities. The matter was never reported. It is a secret between you and me and the sharks. But let me

request that you try not to give way to temperament on this occasion. It is a bit annoying and makes so much extra work for my servants."

As a waiter brought the cognac, Zaneen rose to his feet.

"I trust you will enjoy your visit here," he observed as he sidled away.

Jan Breedon drank the cognac at a single gulp and ordered another. He felt better than he had felt for months. The cognac cleared his vision. It gave him new strength. Zaneen's gracious attitude had gone a great deal toward reviving his spirits. Perhaps this was the turning-point in his life. From now on there would be no more ghosts.

After the third cognac he began making plans for the future. He would go back to the sea again. Only on ships had he ever been happy. The sea was in his blood.

A great huge hulk of a man came and sat down opposite him. He looked like a Norwegian, yet there was no trace of foreign accent in his words as he spoke.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked pleasantly.

Jan Breedon liked him at once. The cognac was strong and it changed his entire view of life. Yes, it was good to have a companion to drink with.

"I've just come ashore," the man went on, "from the British freighter *Caswell,* and I don't know a soul in town. I hate to drink alone."

"Same here," said Jan Breedon. "Join me in a cognac?"

"My favorite drink," agreed the other. "My name is Webster. One of my very distant relatives wrote the dictionary and I can't even read. That's what they call evolution. This morning I deserted my ship because I got sick of smoked fish and corned pork. Might have been able to stomach the feed if occasionally they'd switched to corned fish and smoked pork."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"Oh, from now on," was the airy response, "I'm just going to be a killer."

The casual remark was so great a surprize to Jan Breedon that he dropped his glass and it shattered to pieces on the hardwood floor.

"What?" he gasped.

"Be not disturbed, parson," the other assured him. "I merely mean that from now on I'm going to kill time. I've got quite a nest-egg hidden away, enough money to last for some time; so now I'm simply going to draw heaps of leisure about me and forget the absurdities of this world."

"For a man who cannot read," chuckled Jan Breedon, greatly relieved, "you certainly go in for elegant English."

"That is perhaps due to the family heritage," explained Webster. "It is a direct influence from the third cousin of my grand-uncle. Somehow words like that come natural-like to me, but reading is something else again."

BEFORE an hour had passed, the two were fast friends. They had reached a maudlin stage, and Jan Breedon was telling the history of his life. But even in his sodden condition he had sense enough not to mention the turmoil he had caused in the Grandon family. At Webster's suggestion, they had gone upstairs to a tiny private room where they could drink like gentlemen. Now they were ordering cognac by the bottle and Jan Breedon had long since forgotten how much he drank. Webster very accommodatingly filled up the glasses as soon as they were empty. Thus it was that Jan Breedon did not notice that his companion was actually drinking almost nothing. When he lifted a glass of cognac to his lips he scarcely sipped it. Nor

did he notice when Webster slipped a small powder into one of his drinks. After that he became very drowsy. Webster, too, closed his eyes. At last Jan Breedon buried his head in his arms and commenced snoring like a mountain lion.

Webster, of the elegant phrases, waited for about five minutes. Then he rose cautiously and shook the sleeping form. His manner was rough, but there was no response. He laughed shortly as he walked across the room and opened the hall door. Zaneen stood on the threshold.

"So your long period of waiting is over," he said.

"Come ahead, let's get him out," was the curt response. "If you will lead the way I'll sling him over my back. He'll be out for the next six hours anyway, and that'll be the easiest way to carry him."

Down the long winding hall they crept, and out into the night via a narrow hidden stairway in the back of the building. Outside, an automobile was waiting. Soon they were speeding down to the docks. Never once did Jan Breedon awaken, not even as he was carried on board a tramp steamer and flung on a bunk in a dirty forecastle. Zaneen returned in the auto to his hotel. That night at least Jan Breedon would cause him no trouble.

HOURS later, when Breedon awoke, he had no idea where he was. His mouth was dry and he felt as though he had been eating sawdust. When he struggled to a sitting position his head struck hard against the edge of the bunk above him, but of course he had no idea what had struck him. His head had been aching anyway, and now the pain increased until it felt as though it were almost bursting. He fell back on the blankets and closed his eyes. Even then everything seemed whirling dizzily about. Still he was dying of thirst. He must find water.

Cautiously he rose to his feet. By the motion of the bed, he knew he was on shipboard. He decided he had been shanghaied. After all, what did it matter? He wanted to return to the sea and it was as well to accomplish this by an underground route as any other. But they needn't have gone to the trouble of shanghaiing him. He'd have signed up willingly. Had he not already decided to return to the sea?

He beheld a pail of water standing a short distance away. In it there was a tin dipper. The water was cool to the taste. Several times he filled the dipper. His body seemed porous. It absorbed the water like a sponge. He wondered if Webster had been shanghaied too. He imagined so. It would help make the voyage endurable if his friend was on board. What matter that he had known him only a few hours? They could not have gotten along better if they had been lifelong friends.

Unsteadily he made his way up to the deck. It was almost deserted, although there were a few figures moving about in the bow. Then he beheld a life-buoy tied to the railing. It held his gaze as though it were riveted, and as he gazed at it speechless, all color drained from his face. For on the life-buoy was printed *S. S. Banzai.* He was on board Lee Grandon's boat. He had not been shanghaied because the ship needed seamen. His being there was a deliberate plot. He knew that this was to be his last voyage. The *Banzai* was sailing for hell.

He clutched at the railing and moaned. At that moment, a Chinaman approached him. His face was so thin it seemed to Jan Breedon, in his overwrought condition, that it was the face of a living skeleton. As a matter of fact, the Chinaman was only the cook of the *Banzai,* and a

most excellent cook he was. He had no thought that rose above the preparation of foods. For more than a century his ancestors had all been cooks.

"Follow me," he said briefly.

Jan Breedon made no protest. He felt beaten. He could not have fought against the summons if he had tried.

The Chinaman led the way down to the closed door of a cabin.

"Go in there," he said.

Jan Breedon did so. It was a small cabin, the room such as a captain might occupy on any small ship. On one side there was a bunk. Next to it there was a desk on which lay a few books and some papers. There were also a few chairs and a small table. Beside the table Captain Grandon was sitting. He looked at Jan Breedon coldly. In the center of his forehead there was a small scar such as might have been made by a bullet. Around his neck were several reddish scars that might have come from knife wounds.

"Sit down," he ordered curtly.

Jan Breedon collapsed into a chair. All blood seemed to have drained from his body. The room was strangely cold.

CAPTAIN GRANDON sat and peered at him, and under the intense glowing hatred of those eyes Jan Breedon felt himself withering. He endured untold agony.

Finally, Captain Grandon spoke. "Twice you have killed me," he said slowly, "but I have no desire to remain dead. You can't kill me and make a success of it, because I will not die. But you are causing me a great deal of bother. I hate these scars."

As he spoke he touched his forehead and his neck.

"They cause men to comment. I hate people to avoid me. That time in Penang when you slit my throat, stories got out about it. Some said I had died and been reincarnated. They were afraid of me. I don't want to walk about the world having people believe that I am a ghost. The first time I did not mind so much. The scar between the eyes was a trivial thing. But after you had killed me the second time I vowed vengeance upon you. That is why you are here. But at heart I am a friendly person. I am offering you a preference in making your exit from this world. For a while I heeded the pleadings of my Chinese crew. They desire to bestow death upon you by *ling-chi,* which as you know is death by a thousand cuts, death by the slow or slicing process. They are waiting outside that door. If you leave this cabin they will know that that is the death you prefer. However, I am of a far more gentle nature. I believe in death without pain, death from a subtle poison, so that a man may die and suffer little hardship. In other words, a quiet release. On the table before you is a glass of a colorless liquid. It is tasteless. Yet in it there is dissolved death so potent that from it no man can escape. If you drink but a small quantity of that thirst-quenching potion, all the cares and troubles of this world will be gone. The choice is entirely yours. Death with dignity or from *ling-chi.*"

Jan Breedon's face was colorless. He tried to speak, but no sound came. Captain Grandon gazed at him and now he was smiling. Jan Breedon's mouth was so dry, it was hard to believe that he had drunk so much water only a few moments before. And only a short distance away was that glass of poison. How cool and enticing it looked! After all, what had life to offer now? With trembling hand he lifted the glass to his lips and drank half the contents. Yes, it was tasteless. He put the glass back on the table. For a moment at least his thirst was assuaged.

"You have chosen wisely," Captain Grandon murmured.

He rose to his feet and lighted a lantern that hung above his head. It was an odd lantern. Pearl gray and very bright. Jan Breedon gazed upon it, fascinated.

Once more Captain Grandon seated himself in his chair. "After all," he said, "there is nothing so tragic about death, as you are perhaps discovering. Now your life is ebbing out. At longest you cannot live beyond sunset. After taking that drug no man ever has done so. You have no pain. Perhaps a suggestion of coldness. Still your face is turning slightly blue, but there is no pain in that."

Captain Grandon's voice had become so rhythmical it was almost a chant. He was singing a sort of dirge, describing the slow processes of death as they crept over Jan Breedon.

Meanwhile Jan Breedon kept gazing at the swaying pearl lantern. Its light hypnotized him. It seemed to be growing larger and larger, brighter and brighter. Then the light began to fade. He was dying. He could feel the coldness of death creeping up his body. A great peace seemed to envelop him. At least death was a means of escape. Now there would be no more ghosts. Perhaps death was but a long sleep, sleep without dreams. He imagined he could feel the poison creeping stealthily through his body, eating up his blood. But there was no pain. The light of the lantern had grown dim. At last, with one last bright shaft of life, it flickered out.

At that moment Jan Breedon's heart stopped beating. It was as though some invisible thread had bound his heart-beat to that light. His head fell forward on his breast and he slumped so grotesquely that he almost fell out of his chair.

CAPTAIN GRANDON smiled. He gazed at the pearl lantern that still blazed steadily as it swayed. Then he reached across the table, took the glass of poison in his hand. Jan Breedon had drunk half of it and he had died. Now Captain Grandon drank the other half.

"Water," he murmured, "nothing but water, the elixir of life, yet to Jan Breedon it brought death, death by suggestion."

He walked across the cabin to where there was a basin of water. Carefully he washed from the center of his forehead the spot that looked like a bullet-hole. Then from his neck he washed the red stains.

"Every man," he reflected, "that kills another, kills himself as well. For him there is no escape."

When he was through washing, he went up on deck. There were no Chinamen loitering outside the cabin door; in fact there were no Chinamen on board the *Banzai* except Wong, the cook, and he was busy in the galley.

Captain Grandon leaned against the railing of the ship and sighed deeply. He felt strangely content, for he had avenged the death of his two brothers.

Jorgas

By ROBERT NELSON

With sighs the potioned flowers stooped to kiss
Pale Jorgas just awaking from his dream
Of olent wine and swirling-shadowed bliss,
And as the blue mist crawled upon the glade
The flowers talked and sang to him, and swayed
In shades with his, but all at once did scream,
"O Jorgas, why art thou a saddened man?"
"My thoughts are wildly blown with lunar dust,
My lips, wine-steeped, are sore from evil prongs,
I cannot break the thousand dream-wrought thongs
That trammel me with dreadful death and must."
"O Jorgas, wine . . . perfumes . . . no courtezan? . . ."
"Oh, cease, and leave me to my misery.
What poisoned hand is this that smooths a face
Of bronze and plucks thy bitter petals free?"
"O Jorgas, wine and shadows all embrace
Themselves with us and thee in ecstasy."
"No! no! I see . . . I hear . . . my eyes . . . that glare. . . ."
"Pale one, look up . . . Her palm . . . Her heart . . . laid bare. . . .
Take it, and She an orb will give to thee. . . ."
"No! no! it is accurst! I know . . . I know
The vipers three who kissed and nuzzled it. . . ."
"You dream as One who dreams below the Pit."
"I would let the flames to wrestle with the snow——"
"No, stay—take thou this knife and cut in twain
The throat of Him who offered thee domain
Within the realm where Specters laugh and dwell."
"Oh, do not say—what is there I can gain?
No! no! I would rather dream in silent hell. . . ."
"He tramps on skulls and gluts on matted hair.
He comes—the Thing, whose noisome cerements shed,
Reveal the storm, the dead, in tortured tread.
O Jorgas, fare thee well! We die in prayer."
"Jorgas, I am He who comes in burning sod."
"My mind betrayed! Oh, do not slay me now!
Remove thy long-dead face and burnt-off brow——"
"Jorgas! Beat thy evil breast and cry for God!"

The Hour of the Dragon

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A stirring and vivid weird story about a barbarian adventurer who made himself a king, and the strange talismanic jewel that was known as the Heart of Ahriman

The Story Thus Far

CONAN, a barbarian adventurer who has made himself king of Aquilonia, finds himself pitted against Xaltotun, an ancient sorcerer and adept of black magic who has been dead for three thousand years. The priests who poisoned Xaltotun had mummified his body, keeping all his organs intact. He is revived by means of a flaming jewel, known as the Heart of Ahriman, which had been stolen from the wizard during his life.

With Xaltotun's aid, the conspirators who had brought him back from death place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia and invade Conan's kingdom. Xaltotun causes the cliffs to fall on Conan's army and captures Conan by means of his dark arts. Valerius, one of the conspirators, ascends the throne of Aquilonia, and Conan is mourned as dead.

Conan, rescued from Xaltotun's dungeons of horror by a girl of the king's seraglio who has fallen in love with him, escapes to Aquilonia and attempts to rally his followers; but they fear Xaltotun's magic too much. Meanwhile King Tarascus, alarmed by the growing power of the sorcerer Xaltotun, steals from him the Heart of Ahriman and sends one of his followers to throw the dread jewel into the sea.

By a heroic feat Conan rescues the beautiful Countess Albiona from the headsman's ax in the Iron Tower, and is aided in making his escape by the weird priests of Asura, whom he had befriended when he was king. He starts for the coast in pursuit of the Heart of Ahriman.

Valerius, who has usurped Conan's throne, sends four Khitan conjurors after Conan, with orders to kill him.

The story continues:

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11. Swords of the South

DAWN that rose over the distant hills shone on the sails of a small craft that dropped down the river which curves to within a mile of the walls of Tarantia, and loops southward like a great shining serpent. This boat differed from the ordinary craft plying the broad Khorotas—fishermen and merchant barges loaded with rich goods. It was long and slender, with a high, curving prow, and was black as ebony, with white skulls painted along the gunwales. Amidships rose a small cabin, the windows closely masked. Other craft gave the ominously painted boat a wide berth; for it was obviously one of those "pilgrim boats" that carried a lifeless follower of Asura on his last mysterious pilgrimage southward to where, far beyond the Poitanian mountains, a river flowed at last into the blue ocean. In that cabin undoubtedly lay the corpse of the departed worshipper. All men were familiar with the sight of those gloomy craft; and the most fanatical votary of Mitra would not dare touch or interfere with their somber voyages.

Where the ultimate destination lay,

This story began in WEIRD TALES for December

"With a curse Conan hewed right and left with his broadsword."

men did not know. Some said Stygia; some a nameless island lying beyond the horizon; others said it was in the glamorous and mysterious land of Vendhya where the dead came home at last. But none knew certainly. They only knew that when a follower of Asura died, the corpse went southward down the great river, in a black boat rowed by a giant slave, and neither boat nor corpse nor slave was ever seen again; unless, indeed, certain dark tales were true, and it was always the same slave who rowed the boats southward.

The man who propelled this particular boat was as huge and brown as the others, though closer scrutiny might have revealed the fact that the hue was the result of carefully applied pigments. He was clad in leather loin-clout and sandals, and he handled the long sweep and oars with unusual skill and power. But none

approached the grim boat closely, for it was well known that the followers of Asura were accursed, and that these pilgrim boats were loaded with dark magic. So men swung their boats wide and muttered an incantation as the dark craft slid past, and they never dreamed that they were thus assisting in the flight of their king and the Countess Albiona.

It was a strange journey, in that black, slim craft down the great river for nearly two hundred miles to where the Khorotas swings eastward, skirting the Poitanian mountains. Like a dream the ever-changing panorama glided past. During the day Albiona lay patiently in the little cabin, as quietly as the corpse she pretended to be. Only late at night, after the pleasure boats with their fair occupants lounging on silken cushions in the flare of torches held by slaves had left the river, before dawn brought the hurrying fisher-boats, did the girl venture out. Then she held the long sweep, cunningly bound in place by ropes to aid her, while Conan snatched a few hours of sleep. But the king needed little rest. The fire of his desire drove him relentlessly, and his powerful frame was equal to the grinding test. Without halt or pause they drove southward.

So down the river they fled, through nights when the flowing current mirrored the million stars, and through days of golden sunlight, leaving winter behind them as they sped southward. They passed cities in the night, above which throbbed and pulsed the reflection of the myriad lights, lordly river villas and fertile groves. So at last the blue mountains of Poitain rose above them, tier above tier, like ramparts of the gods, and the great river, swerving from those turreted cliffs, swept thunderously through the marching hills with many a rapid and foaming cataract.

Conan scanned the shore-line closely, and finally swung the long sweep and headed inshore at a point where a neck of land jutted into the water, and fir trees grew in a curiously symmetrical ring about a gray, strangely shaped rock.

"How these boats ride those falls we hear roaring ahead of us is more than I can see," he grunted. "Hadrathus said they did—but here's where we halt. He said a man would be waiting for us with horses, but I don't see anyone. How word of our coming could have preceded us I don't know anyway."

He drove inshore and bound the prow to an arching root in the low bank, and then, plunging into the water, washed the brown paint from his skin and emerged dripping, and in his natural color. From the cabin he brought forth a suit of Aquilonian ring-mail which Hadrathus had procured for him, and his sword. These he donned while Albiona put on garments suitable for mountain travel. And when Conan was fully armed, and turned to look toward the shore, he started and his hand went to his sword. For on the shore, under the trees, stood a black-cloaked figure holding the reins of a white palfrey and a bay warhorse.

"Who are you?" demanded the king.

The other bowed low.

"A follower of Asura. A command came. I obeyed."

"How, 'came'?" inquired Conan, but the other merely bowed again.

"I have come to guide you through the mountains to the first Poitanian stronghold."

"I don't need a guide," answered Conan. "I know these hills well. I thank you for the horses, but the countess and I will attract less attention alone than if we were accompanied by an acolyte of Asura."

The man bowed profoundly, and giving the reins into Conan's hands, stepped

into the boat. Casting off, he floated down the swift current, toward the distant roar of the unseen rapids.. With a baffled shake of his head, Conan lifted the countess into the palfrey's saddle, and then mounted the war-horse and reined toward the summits that castellated the sky.

The rolling country at the foot of the towering mountains was now a borderland, in a state of turmoil, where the barons reverted to feudal practises, and bands of outlaws roamed unhindered. Poitain had not formally declared her separation from Aquilonia, but she was now, to all intents, a self-contained kingdom, ruled by her hereditary count, Trocero. The rolling south country had submitted nominally to Valerius, but he had not attempted to force the passes guarded by strongholds where the crimson leopard banner of Poitain waved defiantly.

The king and his fair companion rode up the long blue slopes in the soft evening. As they mounted higher, the rolling country spread out like a vast purple mantle far beneath them, shot with the shine of rivers and lakes, the yellow glint of broad fields, and the white gleam of distant towers. Ahead of them and far above, they glimpsed the first of the Poitanian holds—a strong fortress dominating a narrow pass, the crimson banner streaming against the clear blue sky.

Before they reached it, a band of knights in burnished armor rode from among the trees, and their leader sternly ordered the travelers to halt. They were tall men, with the dark eyes and raven locks of the south.

"Halt, sir, and state your business, and why you ride toward Poitain."

"Is Poitain in revolt then," asked Conan, watching the other closely, "that a man in Aquilonian harness is halted and questioned like a foreigner?"

"Many rogues ride out of Aquilonia these days," answered the other coldly. "As for revolt, if you mean the repudiation of a usurper, then Poitain is in revolt. We had rather serve the memory of a dead man than the scepter of a living dog."

Conan swept off his helmet, and shaking back his black mane, stared full at the speaker. The Poitanian started violently and went livid.

"Saints of heaven!" he gasped. "It is the king—*alive!*"

The others stared wildly, then a roar of wonder and joy burst from them. They swarmed about Conan, shouting their war-cries and brandishing their swords in their extreme emotion. The acclaim of Poitanian warriors was a thing to terrify a timid man.

"Oh, but Trocero will weep tears of joy to see you, sire!" cried one.

"Aye, and Prospero!" shouted another. "The general has been like one wrapped in a mantle of melancholy, and curses himself night and day that he did not reach the Valkia in time to die beside his king!"

"Now we will strike for empery!" yelled another, whirling his great sword about his head. "Hail, Conan, *king of Poitain!*"

The clangor of bright steel about him and the thunder of their acclaim frightened the birds that rose in gay-hued clouds from the surrounding trees. The hot southern blood was afire, and they desired nothing but for their new-found sovereign to lead them to battle and pillage.

"What is your command, sire?" they cried. "Let one of us ride ahead and bear the news of your coming into Poitain! Banners will wave from every tower, roses will carpet the road before your horse's feet, and all the beauty and chivalry of the south will give you the honor due you——"

Conan shook his head.

"Who could doubt your loyalty? But winds blow over these mountains into the countries of my enemies, and I would rather these didn't know that I lived—yet. Take me to Trocero, and keep my identity a secret."

So what the knights would have made a triumphal procession was more in the nature of a secret flight. They traveled in haste, speaking to no one, except for a whisper to the captain on duty at each pass; and Conan rode among them with his vizor lowered.

The mountains were uninhabited save by outlaws and garrisons of soldiers who guarded the passes. The pleasure-loving Poitanians had no need nor desire to wrest a hard and scanty living from their stern breasts. South of the ranges the rich and beautiful plains of Poitain stretched to the river Alimane; but beyond the river lay the land of Zingara.

Even now, when winter was crisping the leaves beyond the mountains, the tall rich grass waved upon the plains where grazed the horses and cattle for which Poitain was famed. Palm trees and orange groves smiled in the sun, and the gorgeous purple and gold and crimson towers of castles and cities reflected the golden light. It was a land of warmth and plenty, of beautiful men and ferocious warriors. It is not only the hard lands that breed hard men. Poitain was surrounded by covetous neighbors and her sons learned hardihood in incessant wars. To the north the land was guarded by the mountains, but to the south only the Alimane separated the plains of Poitain from the plains of Zingara, and not once but a thousand times had that river run red. To the east lay Argos and beyond that Ophir, proud kingdoms and avaricious. The knights of Poitain held their lands by the weight and edge of their swords, and little of ease and idleness they knew.

So Conan came presently to the castle of Count Trocero. . . .

CONAN sat on a silken divan in a rich chamber whose filmy curtains the warm breeze billowed. Trocero paced the floor like a panther, a lithe, restless man with the waist of a woman and the shoulders of a swordsman, who carried his years lightly.

"Let us proclaim you king of Poitain!" urged the count. "Let those northern pigs wear the yoke to which they have bent their necks. The south is still yours. Dwell here and rule us, amid the flowers and the palms."

But Conan shook his head. "There is no nobler land on earth than Poitain. But it cannot stand alone, bold as are its sons."

"It *did* stand alone, for generations," retorted Trocero, with the quick jealous pride of his breed. "We were not always a part of Aquilonia."

"I know. But conditions are not as they were then, when all kingdoms were broken into principalities which warred with each other. The days of dukedoms and free cities are past, the days of empires are upon us. Rulers are dreaming imperial dreams, and only in unity is there strength."

"Then let us unite Zingara with Poitain," argued Trocero. "Half a dozen princes strive against each other, and the country is torn asunder by civil wars. We will conquer it, province by province, and add it to your dominions. Then with the aid of the Zingarans we will conquer Argos and Ophir. *We* will build an empire——"

Again Conan shook his head. "Let others dream imperial dreams. I but wish to hold what is mine. I have no desire to rule an empire welded together by blood and fire. It's one thing to seize a throne with the aid of its subjects and rule them

with their consent. It's another to subjugate a foreign realm and rule it by fear. I don't wish to be another Valerius. No, Trocero, I'll rule all Aquilonia and no more, or I'll rule nothing."

"Then lead us over the mountains and we will smite the Nemedians."

Conan's fierce eyes glowed with appreciation.

"No, Trocero. It would be a vain sacrifice. I've told you what I must do to regain my kingdom. I must find the Heart of Ahriman."

"But this is madness!" protested Trocero. "The maunderings of a heretical priest, the mumblings of a mad witch-woman."

"You were not in my tent before Valkia," answered Conan grimly, involuntarily glancing at his right wrist, on which blue marks still showed faintly. "You didn't see the cliffs thunder down to crush the flower of my army. No, Trocero, I've been convinced. Xaltotun's no mortal man, and only with the Heart of Ahriman can I stand against him. So I'm riding to Kordava, alone."

"But that is dangerous," protested Trocero.

"Life is dangerous," rumbled the king. "I won't go as king of Aquilonia, or even as a knight of Poitain, but as a wandering mercenary, as I rode in Zingara in the old days. Oh, I have enemies enough south of the Alimane, in the lands and the waters of the south. Many who won't know me as king of Aquilonia will remember me as Conan of the Barachan pirates, or Amra of the black corsairs. But I have friends, too, and men who'll aid me for their own private reasons." A faintly reminiscent grin touched his lips.

Trocero dropped his hands helplessly and glanced at Albiona, who sat on a near-by divan.

"I understand your doubts, my lord," said she. "But I too saw the coin in the temple of Asura, and look you, Hadrathus said it was dated five hundred years *before* the fall of Acheron. If Xaltotun, then, is the man pictured on the coin, as his Majesty swears he is, that means he was no common wizard, even in his other life, for the years of his life were numbered by centuries, not as the lives of other men are numbered."

Before Trocero could reply, a respectful rap was heard on the door and a voice called: "My lord, we have caught a man skulking about the castle, who says he wishes to speak with your guest. I await your orders."

"A spy from Aquilonia!" hissed Trocero, catching at his dagger, but Conan lifted his voice and called: "Open the door and let me see him."

The door was opened and a man was framed in it, grasped on either hand by stern-looking men-at-arms. He was a slender man, clad in a dark hooded robe.

"Are you a follower of Asura?" asked Conan.

The man nodded, and the stalwart men-at-arms looked shocked and glanced hesitantly at Trocero.

"The word came southward," said the man. "Beyond the Alimane we can not aid you, for our sect goes no farther southward, but stretches eastward with the Khorotas. But this I have learned: the thief who took the Heart of Ahriman from Tarascus never reached Kordava. In the mountains of Poitain he was slain by robbers. The jewel fell into the hands of their chief, who, not knowing its true nature, and being harried after the destruction of his band by Poitanian knights, sold it to the Kothic merchant Zorathus."

"Ha!" Conan was on his feet, galvanized. "And what of Zorathus?"

"Four days ago he crossed the Alimane, headed for Argos, with a small band of armed servants."

"He's a fool to cross Zingara in such times," said Trocero.

"Aye, times are troublous across the river. But Zorathus is a bold man, and reckless in his way. He is in great haste to reach Messantia, where he hopes to find a buyer for the jewel. Perhaps he hopes to sell it finally in Stygia. Perhaps he guesses at its true nature. At any rate, instead of following the long road that winds along the borders of Poitain and so at last comes into Argos far from Messantia, he has struck straight across eastern Zingara, following the shorter and more direct route."

Conan smote the table with his clenched fist so that the great board quivered.

"Then, by Crom, fortune has at last thrown the dice for me! A horse, Trocero, and the harness of a Free Companion! Zorathus has a long start, but not too long for me to overtake him, if I follow him to the end of the world!"

12. The Fang of the Dragon

AT DAWN Conan waded his horse across the shallows of the Alimane and struck the wide caravan trail which ran southeastward, and behind him, on the farther bank, Trocero sat his horse silently at the head of his steel-clad knights, with the crimson leopard of Poitain floating its long folds over him in the morning breeze. Silently they sat, those dark-haired men in shining steel, until the figure of their king had vanished in the blue of distance that whitened toward sunrise.

Conan rode a great black stallion, the gift of Trocero. He no longer wore the armor of Aquilonia. His harness proclaimed him a veteran of the Free Companies, who were of all races. His headpiece was a plain morion, dented and battered. The leather and mail-mesh of his hauberk were worn and shiny as if by many campaigns, and the scarlet cloak flowing carelessly from his mailed shoulders was tattered and stained. He looked the part of the hired fighting-man, who had known all vicissitudes of fortune, plunder and wealth one day, an empty purse and a close-drawn belt the next.

And more than looking the part, he felt the part; the awakening of old memories, the resurge of the wild, mad, glorious days of old before his feet were set on the imperial path when he was a wandering mercenary, roistering, brawling, guzzling, adventuring, with no thought for the morrow, and no desire save sparkling ale, red lips, and a keen sword to swing on all the battlefields of the world.

Unconsciously he reverted to the old ways; a new swagger became evident in his bearing, in the way he sat his horse; half-forgotten oaths rose naturally to his lips, and as he rode he hummed old songs that he had roared in chorus with his reckless companions in many a tavern and on many a dusty road or bloody field.

It was an unquiet land through which he rode. The companies of cavalry which usually patrolled the river, alert for raids out of Poitain, were nowhere in evidence. Internal strife had left the borders unguarded. The long white road stretched bare from horizon to horizon. No laden camel trains or rumbling wagons or lowing herds moved along it now; only occasional groups of horsemen in leather and steel, hawk-faced, hard-eyed men, who kept together and rode warily. These swept Conan with their searching gaze but rode on, for the solitary rider's harness promised no plunder, but only hard strokes.

Villages lay in ashes and deserted, the fields and meadows idle. Only the boldest would ride the roads these days, and the native population had been decimated in the civil wars, and by raids from across the river. In more peaceful times the

road was thronged with merchants riding Poitain to Messantia in Argos, or back. But now these found it wiser to follow the road that led east through Poitain, and then turned south down across Argos. It was longer, but safer. Only an extremely reckless man would risk his life and goods on this road through Zingara.

The southern horizon was fringed with flame by night, and in the day straggling pillars of smoke drifted upward; in the cities and plains to the south men were dying, thrones were toppling and castles going up in flames. Conan felt the old tug of the professional fighting-man, to turn his horse and plunge into the fighting, the pillaging and the looting as in the days of old. Why should he toil to regain the rule of a people which had already forgotten him?—why chase a will-o'-the-wisp, why pursue a crown that was lost for ever? Why should he not seek forgetfulness, lose himself in the red tides of war and rapine that had engulfed him so often before? Could he not, indeed, carve out another kingdom for himself? The world was entering an age of iron, an age of war and imperialistic ambition; some strong man might well rise above the ruins of nations as a supreme conqueror. Why should it not be himself? So his familiar devil whispered in his ear, and the phantoms of his lawless and bloody past crowded upon him. But he did not turn aside; he rode onward, following a quest that grew dimmer and dimmer as he advanced, until sometimes it seemed that he pursued a dream that never was.

He pushed the black stallion as hard as he dared, but the long white road lay bare before him, from horizon to horizon. It was a long start Zorathus had, but Conan rode steadily on, knowing that he was traveling faster than the burdened merchants could travel. And so he came to the castle of Count Valbroso, perched like a vulture's eyrie on a bare hill overlooking the road.

VALBROSO rode down with his men-at-arms, a lean, dark man with glittering eyes and a predatory beak of a nose. He wore black plate-armor and was followed by thirty spearmen, black-mustached hawks of the border wars, as avaricious and ruthless as himself. Of late the toll of the caravans had been slim, and Valbroso cursed the civil wars that stripped the roads of their fat traffic, even while he blessed them for the free hand they allowed him with his neighbors.

He had not hoped much from the solitary rider he had glimpsed from his tower, but all was grist that came to his mill. With a practised eye he took in Conan's worn mail and dark, scarred face, and his conclusions were the same as those of the riders who had passed the Cimmerian on the road—an empty purse and a ready blade.

"Who are you, knave?" he demanded.

"A mercenary, riding for Argos," answered Conan. "What matter names?"

"You are riding in the wrong direction for a Free Companion," grunted Valbroso. "Southward the fighting is good and also the plundering. Join my company. You won't go hungry. The road remains bare of fat merchants to strip, but I mean to take my rogues and fare southward to sell our swords to whichever side seems strongest."

Conan did not at once reply, knowing that if he refused outright, he might be instantly attacked by Valbroso's men-at-arms. Before he could make up his mind, the Zingaran spoke again:

"You rogues of the Free Companies always know tricks to make men talk. I have a prisoner—the last merchant I caught, by Mitra, and the only one I've seen for a week—and the knave is stub-

born. He has an iron box, the secret of which defies us, and I've been unable to persuade him to open it. By Ishtar, I thought I knew all the modes of persuasion there are, but perhaps you, as a veteran Free Companion, know some that I do not. At any rate come with me and see what you may do."

Valbroso's words instantly decided Conan. That sounded a great deal like Zorathus. Conan did not know the merchant, but any man who was stubborn enough to try to traverse the Zingaran road in times like these would very probably be stubborn enough to defy torture.

He fell in beside Valbroso and rode up the straggling road to the top of the hill where the gaunt castle stood. As a man-at-arms he should have ridden behind the count, but force of habit made him careless and Valbroso paid no heed. Years of life on the border had taught the count that the frontier is not the royal court. He was aware of the independence of the mercenaries, behind whose swords many a king had trodden the throne-path.

There was a dry moat, half filled with debris in some places. They clattered across the drawbridge and through the arch of the gate. Behind them the portcullis fell with a sullen clang. They came into a bare courtyard, grown with straggling grass, and with a well in the middle. Shacks for the men-at-arms straggled about the bailey wall, and women, slatternly or decked in gaudy finery, looked from the doors. Fighting-men in rusty mail tossed dice on the flags under the arches. It was more like a bandit's hold than the castle of a nobleman.

Valbroso dismounted and motioned Conan to follow him. They went through a doorway and along a vaulted corridor, where they were met by a scarred, hard-looking man in mail descending a stone staircase — evidently the captain of the guard.

"How, Beloso," quoth Valbroso; "has he spoken?"

"He is stubborn," muttered Beloso, shooting a glance of suspicion at Conan.

Valbroso ripped out an oath and stamped furiously up the winding stair, followed by Conan and the captain. As they mounted, the groans of a man in mortal agony became audible. Valbroso's torture-room was high above the court, instead of in a dungeon below. In that chamber, where a gaunt, hairy beast of a man in leather breeks squatted gnawing a beef-bone voraciously, stood the machines of torture—racks, boots, hooks and all the implements that the human mind devises to tear flesh, break bones and rend and rupture veins and ligaments.

On a rack a man was stretched naked, and a glance told Conan that he was dying. The unnatural elongation of his limbs and body told of unhinged joints and unnamable ruptures. He was a dark man, with an intelligent, aquiline face and quick dark eyes. They were glazed and bloodshot now with pain, and the dew of agony glistened on his face. His lips were drawn back from blackened gums.

"There is the box." Viciously Valbroso kicked a small but heavy iron chest that stood on the floor near by. It was intricately carved, with tiny skulls and writhing dragons curiously intertwined, but Conan saw no catch or hasp that might serve to unlock the lid. The marks of fire, of ax and sledge and chisel showed on it but as scratches.

"This is the dog's treasure box," said Valbroso angrily. "All men of the south know of Zorathus and his iron chest. Mitra knows what is in it. But he will not give up its secret."

Zorathus! It was true, then; the man he sought lay before him. Conan's heart beat suffocatingly as he leaned over the

writhing form, though he exhibited no evidence of his painful eagerness.

"Ease those ropes, knave!" he ordered the torturer harshly, and Valbroso and his captain stared. In the forgetfulness of the moment Conan had used his imperial tone, and the brute in leather instinctively obeyed the knife-edge of command in that voice. He eased away gradually, for else the slackening of the ropes had been as great a torment to the torn joints as further stretching.

CATCHING up a vessel of wine that stood near by, Conan placed the rim to the wretch's lips. Zorathus gulped spasmodically, the liquid slopping over on his heaving breast.

Into the bloodshot eyes came a gleam of recognition, and the froth-smeared lips parted. From them issued a racking whimper in the Kothic tongue.

"Is this death, then? Is the long agony ended? For this is King Conan who died at Valkia, and I am among the dead."

"You're not dead," said Conan. "But you're dying. You'll be tortured no more. I'll see to that. But I can't help you further. Yet before you die, tell me how to open your iron box!"

"My iron box," mumbled Zorathus in delirious disjointed phrases. "The chest forged in unholy fires among the flaming mountains of Khrosha; the metal no chisel can cut. How many treasures has it borne, across the width and the breadth of the world! But no such treasure as it now holds."

"Tell me how to open it," urged Conan. "It can do you no good, and it may aid me."

"Aye, you are Conan," muttered the Kothian. "I have seen you sitting on your throne in the great public hall of Tarantia, with your crown on your head and the scepter in your hand. But you are dead; you died at Valkia. And so I know my own end is at hand."

"What does the dog say?" demanded Valbroso impatiently, not understanding Kothic. "Will he tell us how to open the box?"

As if the voice roused a spark of life in the twisted breast Zorathus rolled his bloodshot eyes toward the speaker.

"Only Valbroso will I tell," he gasped in Zingaran. "Death is upon me. Lean close to me, Valbroso!"

The count did so, his dark face lit with avarice; behind him his saturnine captain, Beloso, crowded closer.

"Press the seven skulls on the rim, one after another," gasped Zorathus. "Press then the head of the dragon that writhes across the lid. Then press the sphere in the dragon's claws. That will release the secret catch."

"Quick, the box!" cried Valbroso with an oath.

Conan lifted it and set it on a dais, and Valbroso shouldered him aside.

"Let me open it!" cried Beloso, starting forward.

Valbroso cursed him back, his greed blazing in his black eyes.

"None but me shall open it!" he cried.

Conan, whose hand had instinctively gone to his hilt, glanced at Zorathus. The man's eyes were glazed and bloodshot, but they were fixed on Valbroso with burning intensity; and was there the shadow of a grim twisted smile on the dying man's lips? Not until the merchant knew he was dying had he given up the secret. Conan turned to watch Valbroso, even as the dying man watched him.

Along the rim of the lid seven skulls were carved among intertwining branches of strange trees. An inlaid dragon writhed its way across the top of the lid, amid ornate arabesques. Valbroso pressed the skulls in fumbling haste, and as he jammed his thumb down on the carved

head of the dragon he swore sharply and snatched his hand away, shaking it in irritation.

"A sharp point on the carvings," he snarled. "I've pricked my thumb."

He pressed the gold ball clutched in the dragon's talons, and the lid flew abruptly open. Their eyes were dazzled by a golden flame. It seemed to their dazed minds that the carven box was full of glowing fire that spilled over the rim and dripped through the air in quivering flakes. Beloso cried out and Valbroso sucked in his breath. Conan stood speechless, his brain snared by the blaze.

"Mitra, what a jewel!" Valbroso's hand dived into the chest, came out with a great pulsing crimson sphere that filled the room with a lambent glow. In its glare Valbroso looked like a corpse. And the dying man on the loosened rack laughed wildly and suddenly.

"Fool!" he screamed. "The jewel is yours! I give you death with it! The scratch on your thumb—look at the dragon's head, Valbroso!"

They all wheeled, stared. Something tiny and dully gleaming stood up from the gaping, carved mouth.

"The dragon's fang!" shrieked Zorathus. "Steeped in the venom of the black Stygian scorpion! Fool, fool to open the box of Zorathus with your naked hand! Death! You are a dead man now!"

And with bloody foam on his lips he died.

Valbroso staggered, crying out. "Ah, Mitra, I burn!" he shrieked. "My veins race with liquid fire! My joints are bursting asunder! Death! Death!" And he reeled and crashed headlong. There was an instant of awful convulsions, in which the limbs were twisted into hideous and unnatural positions, and then in that posture the man froze, his glassy eyes staring sightlessly upward, his lips drawn back from blackened gums.

"Dead!" muttered Conan, stooping to pick up the jewel where it rolled on the floor from Valbroso's rigid hand. It lay on the floor like a quivering pool of sunset fire.

"Dead!" muttered Beloso, with madness in his eyes. And then he moved.

Conan was caught off guard, his eyes dazzled, his brain dazed by the blaze of the great gem. He did not realize Beloso's intention until something crashed with terrible force upon his helmet. The glow of the jewel was splashed with redder flame, and he went to his knees under the blow.

He heard a rush of feet, a bellow of ox-like agony. He was stunned but not wholly senseless, and realized that Beloso had caught up the iron box and crashed it down on his head as he stooped. Only his basinet had saved his skull. He staggered up, drawing his sword, trying to shake the dimness out of his eyes. The room swam to his dizzy gaze. But the door was open and fleet footsteps were dwindling down the winding stair. On the floor the brutish torturer was gasping out his life with a great gash under his breast. And the Heart of Ahriman was gone.

CONAN reeled out of the chamber, sword in hand, blood streaming down his face from under his burganet. He ran drunkenly down the steps, hearing a clang of steel in the courtyard below, shouts, then the frantic drum of hoofs. Rushing into the bailey he saw the men-at-arms milling about confusedly, while women screeched. The postern gate stood open and a soldier lay across his pike with his head split. Horses, still bridled and saddled, ran neighing about the court, Conan's black stallion among them.

"He's mad!" howled a woman, wringing her hands as she rushed brainlessly

about. "He came out of the castle like a mad dog, hewing right and left! Beloso's mad! Where's Lord Valbroso?"

"Which way did he go?" roared Conan.

All turned and stared at the stranger's blood-stained face and naked sword.

"Through the postern!" shrilled a woman, pointing eastward, and another bawled: "Who is this rogue?"

"Beloso has killed Valbroso!" yelled Conan, leaping and seizing the stallion's mane, as the men-at-arms advanced uncertainly on him. A wild outcry burst forth at his news, but their reaction was exactly as he had anticipated. Instead of closing the gates to take him prisoner, or pursuing the fleeing slayer to avenge their lord, they were thrown into even greater confusion by his words. Wolves bound together only by fear of Valbroso, they owed no allegiance to the castle or to each other.

Swords began to clash in the courtyard, and women screamed. And in the midst of it all, none noticed Conan as he shot through the postern gate and thundered down the hill. The wide plain spread before him, and beyond the hill the caravan road divided; one branch ran south, the other east. And on the eastern road he saw another rider, bending low and spurring hard. The plain swam to Conan's gaze, the sunlight was a thick red haze and he reeled in his saddle, grasping the flowing mane with his hand. Blood rained on his mail, but grimly he urged the stallion on.

Behind him smoke began to pour out of the castle on the hill where the count's body lay forgotten and unheeded beside that of his prisoner. The sun was setting; against a lurid red sky the two black figures fled.

The stallion was not fresh, but neither was the horse ridden by Beloso. But the great beast responded mightily, calling on deep reservoirs of reserve vitality. Why the Zingaran fled from one pursuer Conan did not tax his bruised brain to guess. Perhaps unreasoning panic rode Beloso, born of the madness that lurked in that blazing jewel. The sun was gone; the white road was a dim glimmer through a ghostly twilight fading into purple gloom far ahead of him.

The stallion panted, laboring hard. The country was changing, in the gathering dusk. Bare plains gave way to clumps of oaks and alders. Low hills mounted up in the distance. Stars began to blink out. The stallion gasped and reeled in his course. But ahead rose a dense wood that stretched to the hills on the horizon, and between it and himself Conan glimpsed the dim form of the fugitive. He urged on the distressed stallion, for he saw that he was overtaking his prey, yard by yard. Above the pound of the hoofs a strange cry rose from the shadows, but neither pursuer nor pursued gave heed.

As they swept in under the branches that overhung the road, they were almost side by side. A fierce cry rose from Conan's lips as his sword went up; a pale oval of a face was turned toward him, a sword gleamed in a half-seen hand, and Beloso echoed the cry — and then the weary stallion, with a lurch and a groan, missed his footing in the shadows and went heels over head, hurling his dazed rider from the saddle. Conan's throbbing head crashed against a stone, and the stars were blotted out in a thicker night.

How long Conan lay senseless he never knew. His first sensation of returning consciousness was that of being dragged by one arm over rough and stony ground, and through dense underbrush. Then he was thrown carelessly down, and perhaps the jolt brought back his senses.

His helmet was gone, his head ached

abominably, he felt a qualm of nausea, and blood was clotted thickly among his black locks. But with the vitality of a wild thing life and consciousness surged back into him, and he became aware of his surroundings.

A broad red moon was shining through the trees, by which he knew that it was long after midnight. He had lain senseless for hours, long enough to have recovered from that terrible blow Beloso had dealt him, as well as the fall which had rendered him senseless. His brain felt clearer than it had felt during that mad ride after the fugitive.

He was not lying beside the white road, he noticed with a start of surprize, as his surroundings began to record themselves on his perceptions. The road was nowhere in sight. He lay on the grassy earth, in a small glade hemmed in by a black wall of tree stems and tangled branches. His face and hands were scratched and lacerated as if he had been dragged through brambles. Shifting his body he looked about him. And then he started violently—something was squatting over him. . . .

At first Conan doubted his consciousness, thought it was but a figment of delirium. Surely it could not be real, that strange, motionless gray being that squatted on its haunches and stared down at him with unblinking soulless eyes.

Conan lay and stared, half expecting it to vanish like a figure of a dream, and then a chill of recollection crept along his spine. Half-forgotten memories surged back, of grisly tales whispered of the shapes that haunted these uninhabited forests at the foot of the hills that mark the Zingaran-Argossean border. *Ghouls,* men called them, eaters of human flesh, spawn of darkness, children of unholy matings of a lost and forgotten race with the demons of the underworld. Somewhere in these primitive forests were the ruins of an ancient, accursed city, men whispered, and among its tombs slunk gray, anthropomorphic shadows—Conan shuddered strongly.

He lay staring at the malformed head that rose dimly above him, and cautiously he extended a hand toward the sword at his hip. With a horrible cry that the man involuntarily echoed, the monster was at his throat.

Conan threw up his right arm, and the dog-like jaws closed on it, driving the mail links into the hard flesh. The misshapen yet man-like hands clutched for his throat, but he evaded them with a heave and roll of his whole body, at the same time drawing his dagger with his left hand.

They tumbled over and over on the grass, smiting and tearing. The muscles coiling under that gray corpse-like skin were stringy and hard as steel wires, exceeding the strength of a man. But Conan's thews were iron too, and his mail saved him from the gnashing fangs and ripping claws long enough for him to drive home his dagger, again and again and again. The horrible vitality of the semi-human monstrosity seemed inexhaustible, and the king's skin crawled at the feel of that slick, clammy flesh. He put all his loathing and savage revulsion behind the plunging blade, and suddenly the monster heaved up convulsively beneath him as the point found its grisly heart, and then lay still.

Conan rose, shaken with nausea. He stood in the center of the glade uncertainly, sword in one hand and dagger in the other. He had not lost his instinctive sense of direction, as far as the points of the compass were concerned, but he did not know in which direction the road lay. He had no way of knowing in which direction the ghoul had dragged him. Conan glared at the silent, black, moon-dappled woods which ringed him, and

felt cold moisture bead his flesh. He was without a horse and lost in these haunted woods, and that staring, deformed thing at his feet was a mute evidence of the horrors that lurked in the forest. He stood almost holding his breath in his painful intensity, straining his ears for some crack of twig or rustle of grass.

When a sound did come he started violently. Suddenly out on the night air broke the scream of a terrified horse. His stallion! There were panthers in the wood —or—ghouls ate beasts as well as men.

He broke savagely through the brush in the direction of the sound, whistling shrilly as he ran, his fear drowned in berserk rage. If his horse was killed, there went his last chance of following Beloso and recovering the jewel. Again the stallion screamed with fear and fury, somewhere nearer. There was a sound of lashing heels, and something that was struck heavily and gave way.

Conan burst out into the wide white road without warning, and saw the stallion plunging and rearing in the moonlight, his ears laid back, his eyes and teeth flashing wickedly. He lashed out with his heels at a slinking shadow that ducked and bobbed about him—and then about Conan other shadows moved: gray, furtive shadows that closed in on all sides. A hideous charnel-house scent reeked up in the night air.

With a curse the king hewed right and left with his broadsword, thrust and ripped with his dagger. Dripping fangs flashed in the moonlight, foul paws caught at him, but he hacked his way through to the stallion, caught the rein, leaped into the saddle. His sword rose and fell, a frosty arc in the moon, showering blood as it split misshapen heads, clove shambling bodies. The stallion reared, biting and kicking. They burst through and thundered down the road. On either hand, for a short space, flitted gray abhorrent shadows. Then these fell behind, and Conan, topping a wooded crest, saw a vast expanse of bare slopes sweeping up and away before him.

13. "A Ghost Out of the Past"

SOON after sunrise Conan crossed the Argossean border. Of Beloso he had seen no trace. Either the captain had made good his escape while the king lay senseless, or had fallen prey to the grim man-eaters of the Zingaran forest. But Conan had seen no signs to indicate the latter possibility. The fact that he had lain unmolested for so long seemed to indicate that the monsters had been engrossed in futile pursuit of the captain. And if the man lived, Conan felt certain that he was riding along the road somewhere ahead of him. Unless he had intended going into Argos he would never have taken the eastward road in the first place.

The helmeted guards at the frontier did not question the Cimmerian. A single wandering mercenary required no passport nor safe-conduct, especially when his unadorned mail showed him to be in the service of no lord. Through the low, grassy hills where streams murmured and oak groves dappled the sward with lights and shadows he rode, following the long road that rose and fell away ahead of him over dales and rises in the blue distance. It was an old, old road, this highway from Poitain to the sea.

Argos was at peace; laden ox-wains rumbled along the road, and men with bare, brown, brawny arms toiled in orchards and fields that smiled away under the branches of the roadside trees. Old men on settles before inns under spreading oak branches called greetings to the wayfarer.

From the men that worked the fields, from the garrulous old men in the inns

where he slaked his thirst with great leathern jacks of foaming ale, from the sharp-eyed silk-clad merchants he met upon the road, Conan sought for news of Beloso.

Stories were conflicting, but this much Conan learned: that a lean, wiry Zingaran with the dangerous black eyes and mustaches of the western folk was somewhere on the road ahead of him, and apparently making for Messantia. It was a logical destination; all the sea-ports of Argos were cosmopolitan, in strong contrast with the inland provinces, and Messantia was the most polyglot of all. Craft of all the maritime nations rode in its harbor, and refugees and fugitives from many lands gathered there. Laws were lax; for Messantia thrived on the trade of the sea, and her citizens found it profitable to be somewhat blind in their dealings with seamen. It was not only legitimate trade that flowed into Messantia; smugglers and buccaneers played their part. All this Conan knew well, for had he not, in the days of old when he was a Barachan pirate, sailed by night into the harbor of Messantia to discharge strange cargoes? Most of the pirates of the Barachan Isles—small islands off the southwestern coast of Zingara—were Argossean sailors, and as long as they confined their attentions to the shipping of other nations, the authorities of Argos were not too strict in their interpretation of sea-laws.

But Conan had not limited his activities to those of the Barachans. He had also sailed with the Zingaran buccaneers, and even with those wild black corsairs that swept up from the far south to harry the northern coasts, and this put him beyond the pale of any law. If he were recognized in any of the ports of Argos it would cost him his head. But without hesitation he rode on to Messantia, halting day or night only to rest the stallion and to snatch a few winks of sleep for himself.

He entered the city unquestioned, merging himself with the throngs that poured continually in and out of this great commercial center. No walls surrounded Messantia. The sea and the ships of the sea guarded the great southern trading city.

It was evening when Conan rode leisurely through the streets that marched down to the waterfront. At the ends of these streets he saw the wharves and the masts and sails of ships. He smelled salt water for the first time in years, heard the thrum of cordage and the creak of spars in the breeze that was kicking up whitecaps out beyond the headlands. Again the urge of far wandering tugged at his heart.

But he did not go on to the wharves. He reined aside and rode up a steep flight of wide, worn stone steps, to a broad street where ornate white mansions overlooked the waterfront and the harbor below. Here dwelt the men who had grown rich from the hard-won fat of the seas—a few old sea-captains who had found treasure afar, many traders and merchants who never trod the naked decks nor knew the roar of tempest or sea-fight.

Conan turned in his horse at a certain gold-worked gate, and rode into a court where a fountain tinkled and pigeons fluttered from marble coping to marble flagging. A page in jagged silken jupon and hose came forward inquiringly. The merchants of Messantia dealt with many strange and rough characters, but most of these smacked of the sea. It was strange that a mercenary trooper should so freely ride into the court of a lord of commerce.

"The merchant Publio dwells here?" It was more statement than question, and

something in the timbre of the voice caused the page to doff his feathered chaperon as he bowed and replied: "Aye, so he does, my captain."

Conan dismounted and the page called a servitor, who came running to receive the stallion's rein.

"Your master is within?" Conan drew off his gauntlets and slapped the dust of the road from cloak and mail.

"Aye, my captain. Whom shall I announce?"

"I'll announce myself," grunted Conan. "I know the way well enough. Bide you here."

And obeying that peremptory command the page stood still, staring after Conan as the latter climbed a short flight of marble steps, and wondering what connection his master might have with this giant fighting-man who had the aspect of a northern barbarian.

Menials at their tasks halted and gaped open-mouthed as Conan crossed a wide, cool balcony overlooking the court and entered a broad corridor through which the sea-breeze swept. Half-way down this he heard a quill scratching, and turned into a broad room whose many wide casements overlooked the harbor.

Publio sat at a carved teakwood desk writing on rich parchment with a golden quill. He was a short man, with a massive head and quick dark eyes. His blue robe was of the finest watered silk, trimmed with cloth-of-gold, and from his thick white throat hung a heavy gold chain.

As the Cimmerian entered, the merchant looked up with a gesture of annoyance. He froze in the midst of his gesture. His mouth opened; he stared as at a ghost out of the past. Unbelief and fear glimmered in his wide eyes.

"Well," said Conan, "have you no word of greeting, Publio?"

Publio moistened his lips.

"Conan!" he whispered incredulously. "Mitra! Conan! *Amra!*"

"Who else?" The Cimmerian unclasped his cloak and threw it with his gauntlets down upon the desk. "How, man?" he exclaimed irritably. "Can't you at least offer me a beaker of wine? My throat's caked with the dust of the highway."

"Aye, wine!" echoed Publio mechanically. Instinctively his hand reached for a gong, then recoiled as from a hot coal, and he shuddered.

While Conan watched him with a flicker of grim amusement in his eyes, the merchant rose and hurriedly shut the door, first craning his neck up and down the corridor to be sure that no slave was loitering about. Then, returning, he took a gold vessel of wine from a near-by table and was about to fill a slender goblet when Conan impatiently took the vessel from him and lifting it with both hands, drank deep and with gusto.

"Aye, it's Conan, right enough," muttered Publio. "Man, are you mad?"

"By Crom, Publio," said Conan, lowering the vessel but retaining it in his hands, "you dwell in different quarters than of old. It takes an Argossean merchant to wring wealth out of a little waterfront shop that stank of rotten fish and cheap wine."

"The old days are past," muttered Publio, drawing his robe about him with a slight involuntary shudder. "I have put off the past like a worn-out cloak."

"Well," retorted Conan, "you can't put *me* off like an old cloak. It isn't much I want of you, but that much I do want. And you can't refuse me. We had too many dealings in the old days. Am I such a fool that I'm not aware that this fine mansion was built on my sweat and blood? How many cargoes from my galleys passed through your shop?"

"All merchants of Messantia have dealt

with the sea-rovers at one time or another," mumbled Publio nervously.

"But not with the black corsairs," answered Conan grimly.

"For Mitra's sake, be silent!" ejaculated Publio, sweat starting out on his brow. His fingers jerked at the gilt-worked edge of his robe.

"Well, I only wished to recall it to your mind," answered Conan. "Don't be so fearful. You took plenty of risks in the past, when you were struggling for life and wealth in that lousy little shop down by the wharves, and were hand-and-glove with every buccaneer and smuggler and pirate from here to the Barachan Isles. Prosperity must have softened you."

"I am respectable," began Publio.

"Meaning you're rich as hell," snorted Conan. "Why? Why did you grow wealthy so much quicker than your competitors? Was it because you did a big business in ivory and ostrich feathers, copper and skins and pearls and hammered gold ornaments, and other things from the coast of Kush? And where did you get them so cheaply, while other merchants were paying their weight in silver to the Stygians for them? I'll tell you, in case you've forgotten: you bought them from me, at considerably less than their value, and I took them from the tribes of the Black Coast, and from the ships of the Stygians—I, and the black corsairs."

"In Mitra's name, cease!" begged Publio. "I have not forgotten. But what are you doing here? I am the only man in Argos who knew that the king of Aquilonia was once Conan the buccaneer, in the old days. But word has come southward of the overthrow of Aquilonia and the death of the king."

"My enemies have killed me a hundred times by rumors," grunted Conan. "Yet here I sit and guzzle wine of Kyros." And he suited the action to the word.

Lowering the vessel, which was now nearly empty, he said: "It's but a small thing I ask of you, Publio. I know that you're aware of everything that goes on in Messantia. I want to know if a Zingaran named Beloso, or he might call himself anything, is in this city. He's tall and lean and dark like all his race, and it's likely he'll seek to sell a very rare jewel."

Publio shook his head.

"I have not heard of such a man. But thousands come and go in Messantia. If he is here my agents will discover him."

"Good. Send them to look for him. And in the meantime have my horse cared for, and have food served me here in this room."

PUBLIO assented volubly, and Conan emptied the wine vessel, tossed it carelessly into a corner, and strode to a near-by casement, involuntarily expanding his chest as he breathed deep of the salt air. He was looking down upon the meandering waterfront streets. He swept the ships in the harbor with an appreciative glance, then lifted his head and stared beyond the bay, far into the blue haze of the distance where sea met sky. And his memory sped beyond that horizon, to the golden seas of the south, under flaming suns, where laws were not and life ran hotly. Some vagrant scent of spice or palm woke clear-etched images of strange coasts where mangroves grew and drums thundered, of ships locked in battle and decks running blood, of smoke and flame and the crying of slaughter. . . . Lost in his thoughts he scarcely noticed when Publio stole from the chamber.

Gathering up his robe, the merchant hurried along the corridors until he came to a certain chamber where a tall, gaunt man with a scar upon his temple wrote

continually upon parchment. There was something about this man which made his clerkly occupation seem incongruous. To him Publio spoke abruptly:

"Conan has returned!"

"Conan?" The gaunt man started up and the quill fell from his fingers. "The corsair?"

"Aye!"

The gaunt man went livid. "Is he mad? If he is discovered here we are ruined! They will hang a man who shelters or trades with a corsair as quickly as they'll hang the corsair himself! What if the governor should learn of our past connections with him?"

"He will not learn," answered Publio grimly. "Send your men into the markets and wharfside dives and learn if one Beloso, a Zingaran, is in Messantia. Conan said he had a gem, which he will probably seek to dispose of. The jewel merchants should know of him, if any do. And here is another task for you: pick up a dozen or so desperate villains who can be trusted to do away with a man and hold their tongues afterward. You understand me?"

"I understand." The other nodded slowly and somberly.

"I have not stolen, cheated, lied and fought my way up from the gutter to be undone now by a ghost out of my past," muttered Publio, and the sinister darkness of his countenance at that moment would have surprized the wealthy nobles and ladies who bought their silks and pearls from his many stalls. But when he returned to Conan a short time later, bearing in his own hands a platter of fruit and meats, he presented a placid face to his unwelcome guest.

Conan still stood at the casement, staring down into the harbor at the purple and crimson and vermilion and scarlet sails of galleons and carracks and galleys and dromonds.

"There's a Stygian galley, if I'm not blind," he remarked, pointing to a long, low, slim black ship lying apart from the others, anchored off the low broad sandy beach that curved round to the distant headland. "Is there peace, then, between Stygia and Argos?"

"The same sort that has existed before," answered Publio, setting the platter on the table with a sigh of relief, for it was heavily laden; he knew his guest of old. "Stygian ports are temporarily open to our ships, as ours to theirs. But may no craft of mine meet their cursed galleys out of sight of land! That galley crept into the bay last night. What its masters wish I do not know. So far they have neither bought nor sold. I distrust those dark-skinned devils. Treachery had its birth in that dusky land."

"I've made them howl," said Conan carelessly, turning from the window. "In my galley manned by black corsairs I crept to the very bastions of the sea-washed castles of black-walled Khemi by night, and burned the galleons anchored there. And speaking of treachery, mine host, suppose you taste these viands and sip a bit of this wine, just to show me that your heart is on the right side."

Publio complied so readily that Conan's suspicions were lulled, and without further hesitation he sat down and devoured enough for three men.

And while he ate, men moved through the markets and along the waterfront, searching for a Zingaran who had a jewel to sell or who sought for a ship to carry him to foreign ports. And a tall gaunt man with a scar on his temple sat with his elbows on a wine-stained table in a squalid cellar with a brass lantern hanging from a smoke-blackened beam overhead, and held converse with ten desperate rogues whose sinister countenances and ragged garments proclaimed their profession.

And as the first stars blinked out, they shone on a strange band spurring their mounts along the white road that led to Messantia from the west. They were four men, tall, gaunt, clad in black, hooded robes, and they did not speak. They forced their steeds mercilessly onward, and those steeds were gaunt as themselves, and sweat-stained and weary as if from long travel and far wandering.

14. The Black Hand of Set

CONAN woke from a sound sleep as quickly and instantly as a cat. And like a cat he was on his feet with his sword out before the man who had touched him could so much as draw back.

"What word, Publio?" demanded Conan, recognizing his host. The gold lamp burned low, casting a mellow glow over the thick tapestries and the rich coverings of the couch whereon he had been reposing.

Publio, recovering from the start given him by the sudden action of his awakening guest, replied: "The Zingaran has been located. He arrived yesterday, at dawn. Only a few hours ago he sought to sell a huge, strange jewel to a Shemitish merchant, but the Shemite would have naught to do with it. Men say he turned pale beneath his black beard at the sight of it, and closing his stall, fled as from a thing accursed."

"It must be Beloso," muttered Conan, feeling the pulse in his temples pounding with impatient eagerness. "Where is he now?"

"He sleeps in the house of Servio."

"I know that dive of old," grunted Conan. "I'd better hasten before some of these waterfront thieves cut his throat for the jewel."

He took up his cloak and flung it over his shoulders, then donned a helmet Publio had procured for him.

"Have my steed saddled and ready in the court," said he. "I may return in haste. I shall not forget this night's work, Publio."

A few moments later Publio, standing at a small outer door, watched the king's tall figure receding down the shadowy street.

"Farewell to you, corsair," muttered the merchant. "This must be a notable jewel, to be sought by a man who has just lost a kingdom. I wish I had told my knaves to let him secure it before they did their work. But then, something might have gone awry. Let Argos forget Amra, and let my dealings with him be lost in the dust of the past. In the alley behind the house of Servio—that is where Conan will cease to be a peril to me."

SERVIO's house, a dingy, ill-famed den, was located close to the wharves, facing the waterfront. It was a shambling building of stone and heavy ship-beams, and a long narrow alley wandered up alongside it. Conan made his way along the alley, and as he approached the house he had an uneasy feeling that he was being spied upon. He stared hard into the shadows of the squalid buildings, but saw nothing, though once he caught the faint rasp of cloth or leather against flesh. But that was nothing unusual. Thieves and beggars prowled these alleys all night, and they were not likely to attack him, after one look at his size and harness.

But suddenly a door opened in the wall ahead of him, and he slipped into the shadow of an arch. A figure emerged from the open door and moved along the alley, not furtively, but with a natural noiselessness like that of a jungle beast. Enough starlight filtered into the alley to silhouette the man's profile dimly as he passed the doorway where Conan lurked.

The stranger was a Stygian. There was no mistaking that hawk-faced, shaven head, even in the starlight, nor the mantle over the broad shoulders. He passed on down the alley in the direction of the beach, and once Conan thought he must be carrying a lantern among his garments, for he caught a flash of lambent light, just as the man vanished.

But the Cimmerian forgot the stranger as he noticed that the door through which he had emerged still stood open. Conan had intended entering by the main entrance and forcing Servio to show him the room where the Zingaran slept. But if he could get into the house without attracting anyone's attention, so much the better.

A few long strides brought him to the door, and as his hand fell on the lock he stifled an involuntary grunt. His practised fingers, skilled among the thieves of Zamora long ago, told him that the lock had been forced, apparently by some terrific pressure from the outside that had twisted and bent the heavy iron bolts, tearing the very sockets loose from the jambs. How such damage could have been wrought so violently without awakening everyone in the neighborhood Conan could not imagine, but he felt sure that it had been done that night. A broken lock, if discovered, would not go unmended in the house of Servio, in this neighborhood of thieves and cutthroats.

Conan entered stealthily, poniard in hand, wondering how he was to find the chamber of the Zingaran. Groping in total darkness he halted suddenly. He sensed death in that room, as a wild beast senses it—not as peril threatening him, but a dead thing, something freshly slain. In the darkness his foot hit and recoiled from something heavy and yielding. With a sudden premonition he groped along the wall until he found the shelf that supported the brass lamp, with its flint, steel and tinder beside it. A few seconds later a flickering, uncertain light sprang up, and he stared narrowly about him.

A bunk built against the rough stone wall, a bare table and a bench completed the furnishings of the squalid chamber. An inner door stood closed and bolted. And on the hard-beaten dirt floor lay Beloso. On his back he lay, with his head drawn back between his shoulders so that he seemed to stare with his wide glassy eyes at the sooty beams of the cobwebbed ceiling. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a frozen grin of agony. His sword lay near him, still in its scabbard. His shirt was torn open, and on his brown, muscular breast was the print of a black hand, thumb and four fingers plainly distinct.

Conan glared in silence, feeling the short hairs bristle at the back of his neck.

"Crom!" he muttered. "The black hand of Set!"

He had seen that mark of old, the death-mark of the black priests of Set, the grim cult that ruled in dark Stygia. And suddenly he remembered that curious flash he had seen emanating from the mysterious Stygian who had emerged from this chamber.

"The Heart, by Crom!" he muttered. "He was carrying it under his mantle. He stole it. He burst that door by his magic, and slew Beloso. He was a priest of Set."

A quick investigation confirmed at least part of his suspicions. The jewel was not on the Zingaran's body. An uneasy feeling rose in Conan that this had not happened by chance, or without design; a conviction that that mysterious Stygian galley had come into the harbor of Messantia on a definite mission. How could the priests of Set know that the Heart had come southward? Yet the thought was no more fantastic than the

necromancy that could slay an armed man by the touch of an open, empty hand.

A stealthy footfall outside the door brought him round like a great cat. With one motion he extinguished the lamp and drew his sword. His ears told him that men were out there in the darkness, were closing in on the doorway. As his eyes became accustomed to the sudden darkness, he could make out dim figures ringing the entrance. He could not guess their identity, but as always he took the initiative—leaping suddenly forth from the doorway without awaiting the attack.

His unexpected movement took the skulkers by surprize. He sensed and heard men close about him, saw a dim masked figure in the starlight before him; then his sword crunched home, and he was fleeting away down the alley before the slower-thinking and slower-acting attackers could intercept him.

As he ran he heard, somewhere ahead of him, a faint creak of oar-locks, and he forgot the men behind him. A boat was moving out into the bay! Gritting his teeth he increased his speed, but before he reached the beach he heard the rasp and creak of ropes, and the grind of the great sweep in its socket.

Thick clouds, rolling up from the sea, obscured the stars. In thick darkness Conan came upon the strand, straining his eyes out across the black restless water. Something was moving out there—a long, low, black shape that receded in the darkness, gathering momentum as it went. To his ears came the rhythmical clack of long oars. He ground his teeth in helpless fury. It was the Stygian galley and she was racing out to sea, bearing with her the jewel that meant to him the throne of Aquilonia.

With a savage curse he took a step toward the waves that lapped against the sands, catching at his hauberk and intending to rip it off and swim after the vanishing ship. Then the crunch of a heel in the sand brought him about. He had forgotten his pursuers.

Dark figures closed in on him with a rush of feet through the sands. The first went down beneath the Cimmerian's flailing sword, but the others did not falter. Blades whickered dimly about him in the darkness or rasped on his mail. Blood and entrails spilled over his hand and someone screamed as he ripped murderously upward. A muttered voice spurred on the attack, and that voice sounded vaguely familiar. Conan plowed through the clinging, hacking shapes toward the voice. A faint light gleaming momentarily through the drifting clouds showed him a tall gaunt man with a great livid scar on his temple. Conan's sword sheared through his skull as through a ripe melon.

Then an ax, swung blindly in the dark, crashed on the king's basinet, filling his eyes with sparks of fire. He lurched and lunged, felt his sword sink deep and heard a shriek of agony. Then he stumbled over a corpse, and a bludgeon knocked the dented helmet from his head; the next instant the club fell full on his unprotected skull.

The king of Aquilonia crumpled into the wet sands. Over him wolfish fingers panted in the gloom.

"Strike off his head," muttered one.

"Let him lie," grunted another. "Help me tie up my wounds before I bleed to death. The tide will wash him into the bay. See, he fell at the water's edge. His skull's split; no man could live after such blows."

"Help me strip him," urged another. "His harness will fetch a few pieces of silver. And haste. Tiberio is dead, and I

hear seamen singing as they reel along the strand. Let us be gone."

There followed hurried activity in the darkness, and then the sound of quickly receding footsteps. The tipsy singing of the seamen grew louder.

In his chamber Publio, nervously pacing back and forth before a window that overlooked the shadowed bay, whirled suddenly, his nerves tingling. To the best of his knowledge the door had been bolted from within; but now it stood open and four men filed into the chamber. At the sight of them his flesh crawled. Many strange beings Publio had seen in his lifetime, but none before like these. They were tall and gaunt, black-robed, and their faces were dim yellow ovals in the shadows of their coifs. He could not tell much about their features and was unreasoningly glad that he could not. Each bore a long, curiously mottled staff.

"Who are you?" he demanded, and his voice sounded brittle and hollow. "What do you wish here?"

"Where is Conan, he who was king of Aquilonia?" demanded the tallest of the four in a passionless monotone that made Publio shudder. It was like the hollow tone of a Khitan temple bell.

"I do not know what you mean," stammered the merchant, his customary poise shaken by the uncanny aspect of his visitors. "I know no such man."

"He has been here," returned the other with no change of inflection. "His horse is in the courtyard. Tell us where he is before we do you an injury."

"Gebal!" shouted Publio frantically, recoiling until he crouched against the wall. *"Gebal!"*

The four Khitans watched him without emotion or change of expression.

"If you summon your slave he will die," warned one of them, which only served to terrify Publio more than ever.

"Gebal!" he screamed. "Where are you, curse you? Thieves are murdering your master!"

Swift footsteps padded in the corridor outside, and Gebal burst into the chamber—a Shemite, of medium height and mightily muscled build, his curled blue-black beard bristling, and a short leaf-shaped sword in his hand.

He stared in stupid amazement at the four invaders, unable to understand their presence; dimly remembering that he had drowsed unexplainably on the stair he was guarding and up which they must have come. He had never slept on duty before. But his master was shrieking with a note of hysteria in his voice, and the Shemite drove like a bull at the strangers, his thickly muscled arm drawing back for the disemboweling thrust. But the stroke was never dealt.

A black-sleeved arm shot out, extending the long staff. Its end but touched the Shemite's brawny breast and was instantly withdrawn. The stroke was horribly like the dart and recovery of a serpent's head.

Gebal halted short in his headlong plunge, as if he had encountered a solid barrier. His bull head toppled forward on his breast, the sword slipped from his fingers, and then he *melted* slowly to the floor. It was as if all the bones of his frame had suddenly become flabby. Publio turned sick.

"Do not shout again," advised the tallest Khitan. "Your servants sleep soundly, but if you awaken them they will die, and you with them. Where is Conan?"

"He is gone to the house of Servio, near the waterfront, to search for the Zingaran Beloso," gasped Publio, all his power of resistance gone out of him. The merchant did not lack courage; but these uncanny

visitants turned his marrow to water. He started convulsively at a sudden noise of footsteps hurrying up the stair outside, loud in the ominous stillness.

"Your servant?" asked the Khitan.

Publio shook his head mutely, his tongue frozen to his palate. He could not speak.

One of the Khitans caught up a silken cover from a couch and threw it over the corpse. Then they melted behind the tapestry, but before the tallest man disappeared, he murmured: "Talk to this man who comes, and send him away quickly. If you betray us, neither he nor you will live to reach that door. Make no sign to show him that you are not alone." And lifting his staff suggestively, the yellow man faded behind the hangings.

Publio shuddered and choked down a desire to retch. It might have been a trick of the light, but it seemed to him that occasionally those staffs moved slightly of their own accord, as if possessed of an unspeakable life of their own.

He pulled himself together with a mighty effort, and presented a composed aspect to the ragged ruffian who burst into the chamber.

"We have done as you wished, my lord," this man exclaimed. "The barbarian lies dead on the sands at the water's edge."

Publio felt a movement in the arras behind him, and almost burst from fright. The man swept heedlessly on.

"Your secretary, Tiberio, is dead. The barbarian slew him, and four of my companions. We bore their bodies to the rendezvous. There was nothing of value on the barbarian except a few silver coins. Are there any further orders?"

"None!" gasped Publio, white about the lips. "Go!"

The desperado bowed and hurried out, with a vague feeling that Publio was both a man of weak stomach and few words.

The four Khitans came from behind the arras.

"Of whom did this man speak?" the taller demanded.

"Of a wandering stranger who did me an injury," panted Publio.

"You lie," said the Khitan calmly. "He spoke of the king of Aquilonia. I read it in your expression. Sit upon that divan and do not move or speak. I will remain with you while my three companions go search for the body."

So Publio sat and shook with terror of the silent, inscrutable figure which watched him, until the three Khitans filed back into the room, with the news that Conan's body did not lie upon the sands. Publio did not know whether to be glad or sorry.

"We found the spot where the fight was fought," they said. "Blood was on the sand. But the king was gone."

The fourth Khitan drew imaginary symbols upon the carpet with his staff, which glistened scalily in the lamplight.

"Did you read naught from the sands?" he asked.

"Aye," they answered. "The king lives, and he has gone southward in a ship."

The tall Khitan lifted his head and gazed at Publio, so that the merchant broke into a profuse sweat.

"What do you wish of me?" he stuttered.

"A ship," answered the Khitan. "A ship well manned for a long voyage."

"For how long a voyage?" stammered Publio, never thinking of refusing.

"To the ends of the world, perhaps," answered the Khitan, "or to the molten seas of hell that lie beyond the sunrise."

The astounding weird adventures that befell Conan as he followed in hot pursuit of the Heart of Ahriman will be told in the fascinating chapters that continue this story in next month's WEIRD TALES. Reserve your copy at your news dealer's now.

"She heard snarls of rage, and the pack swept by her."

Norn

By LIREVE MONET

A tale of stark horror—a powerful and thrilling story of dark forces

MY FIRST recollections of my aunt date back almost to infancy. I was passionately fond of her, so fond of her that when she was about I never cared much for my mother. I can see them both now, as they were in the early years—Mother, rather tall, graciously full of figure, often laughing, a little

mercurial in temper, but with the kindest, sweetest, most whimsical pair of gray eyes that ever shone beneath soft brown hair. Norn—whether the name meant what I took it from my early reading to mean: the Norse word "Fate"; or whether it was a childish contraction of some more usual name, such as "Norma", I shall never now discover. Norn, I started to say, was the name of the idolatrously worshipped aunt; and I not only loved the name as being a part of her, but also thought it highly appropriate. She was still taller than my mother, and in a different way—a rangy, long-limbed height most unusual. I have known her to boast that her arms were longer than those of any man she had ever seen, and I believe it. Her features, too, were unusual in their stern, thin-lipped, long-jawed precision, but to me they were more fascinating than any I had ever contemplated. Her eyes were coldly gray, with large, black pupils which never dilated or contracted, but were always set a certain size. As I read what I have written, my picture of Norn—I never called her Aunt—sounds strangely forbidding. I do not know if, in my childhood, I had ever shrunk from her; I know my own child did, on later coming into her presence; but if I ever did that as a child, it was long forgotten in the early mists of infantile perceptions before my acquaintance with her seems to be recorded clearly in my mind.

Beside Norn, my mother, called unusual and fascinating by many people whom we knew, faded into complete nonentity. Her very high spirits seemed trivial and foolish; I can never remember hearing Norn laugh aloud. My mother's occasional lapses from good temper seemed pointless and ineffective in contrast to the cold disapproval, or rarer cold furies, of this favorite aunt. Strange that I should have idolized her—the aunt? But I have painted only half the picture. This aunt, cold toward most of her contemporaries, knew occasional attachments to young children which amounted to a longing and craving for them—for their childish caresses, their admiration. One reason I never cared for my mother when we were with Norn was that my mother was usually busy. Norn did what work about the house she liked to do, sporadically and occasionally. She had a grim love of heavy tasks, and would do the hardest things by choice, avoiding and detesting the routine operations of cooking; and this arrangement of her occupation left her considerable time for me. She would spend hours daily, sometimes whole days at a time, holding me in a close embrace, telling me stories, reading to me, working puzzles. . . .

My mother and I are visiting on the old Iowa farm which Norn has not yet left, in one of my earliest memory-pictures. It is late afternoon of a winter day, and the bluish tinge of early dusk is creeping over the snow-fields.

"Norn! Put that child down and *make* her stir around a little. I want to get her out of doors before it is too late. She hasn't stuck her nose outside today—and she's sat listening to you for three hours without moving. She doesn't eat or sleep so well when she does that all day——"

"You'd better go, Mary Rose. Your mother doesn't want you to listen to me any longer."

No straight answering flare of open anger in reply to my mother's criticism; only the level look of those coldly gray eyes with the large, unchanging pupils. But I felt unutterable things: that my mother was foolishly, pettishly interfering; that, probably, she was jealous of my adoration of Norn; that she was showing an inclination to interfere with the deepest longings and yearnings of my childish

nature; that I must defend myself against my mother, now and in the days to come. I looked into Norn's eyes and thought those things. Later, when it was really night and the lamplight shone in my mother's eyes as she tucked me into bed and gave me my good-night kiss, I could not quite remember those other things I had thought about her. Her eyes were gray too—a warm gray, like the soft gray blanket she still wrapped and rocked me in sometimes—"babied" me in, Norn said. My mother's babying would be only for a little while at a time, bedtimes, or in little spells of illnesses, or in odd moments, but I knew that Norn thought the things my mother did with me were silly. I supposed they were. I didn't remember what Mother had done this afternoon —she had been unreasonable, mean, to me and Norn when we were happy together. But of course, Mother was—Mother. . . .

My eyes were shutting, and as I fell asleep I was wrapped around in the warm gray light that was so different from that other. Little children are so much younger, just at bedtime.

Father and Mother never got along very well, and I thought in my baby-days that was Father's fault. He was very wise and clever; I often heard him sneering at the minds of other people, though never at Norn's mind. He sneered at Mother, though, very openly. He had married mentally beneath him, and some money both he and Mother had expected her to inherit had been left in the wrong place, and that had gone against Father's plans. I knew without being told, that each of them wished they had not married, but that my mother's whole life was bound up in me, while Father had not that compensation. Men are different. Norn helped to teach me that men are on a bigger plane, and children are to admire and revere their fathers very much, whether they feel that they know them very well or not, and whether or not their fathers seem to care very much about them. Also, if men are disagreeable around home, it is the responsibility of the wife and mother to make them feel agreeable. A successful wife always does that, but my mother never managed it.

With my eleventh year, came a parting which agonized me. The Iowa farm was sold. My father, whose business had been in a small, Middle Western town, moved east. Norn came with us to visit, as did also another aunt, Mugsie, a fattish, indeterminate sort of aunt, with her little girl Dorothy, a blond, plump, babyish thing like her mother and yet unlike her, since Dottie was utterly and irresistibly adorable. I shall never forget the utter sweetness, the innocence of Dottie's clear blue eyes, or the warmth of her baby smile. I loved her with all my little-girl heart, and longed for her back as I longed for Norn. I was to have them again. . . .

NORN decided to go to the west coast with Aunt Mugsie and Dottie, who were shortly to join Dottie's father there. I listened to my mother talking this over with Norn. Though I think she must have been jealous of Norn's domination of me, of her assumption of superiority, and of the superiority conceded to her by every member of the family, my mother joined in the universal admiration—which amounted nearly to adoration—of Norn.

"Stay with us, Norn. You and Mugsie will have a good time, but after all, Mugsie can't get around and keep up with you. You and I would go to shows, camp in summer—we're both so much more energetic. And I've always looked after you, made your clothes and fixed them, because I was the oldest girl—you'll miss that."

"Mugsie will learn to do those things

for me." There wasn't an idea that Norn would wait on herself.

"Mugsie *is* selfish. She barely looks after herself."

Norn fixed my mother with that gray gaze.

"I say Mugsie will learn to look after me. Besides, Mugsie and Ralph are going to have money. I think Ralph's investments on the coast will be very good, very soon. I can use a lot of money, and money comes where money is. I care a good deal about having the things I want. I know exactly what I want, and I am going with Mugsie."

That ended that talk, but there was another. I don't know where Norn met Mr. Wolf. I didn't know—I never learned, and can't conjecture now, the nationality of Mr. Wolf. He was the head of a sports-goods establishment, and he employed mostly foreigners — Jews, Armenians, a Chinaman of the tall, raw-boned, Chu Chin Chow type. I have heard Mr. Wolf accused of being all those various things—Jewish, Armenian, Chinese or Tartar, and I have seen him smile suavely and answer "No." The name, of course, is English, but the word "wolf" is known to every race. I am sure the Jews and Armenians in his store feared him. I was never so sure about the Chinaman, but then I have never had to do with Orientals.

Norn brought Mr. Wolf to the house one evening, and it developed that by an odd chance he was going to establish a large branch of his business in the coast city to which Norn was going with Mugsie, and that Norn was to be his secretary-treasurer.

"But that's almost the whole executive staff, and Norn has only studied a little shorthand!" my mother cried in amazement which held an undertone of sheer consternation. "I never heard of——"

That suave smile of Mr. Wolf's bared his gleaming teeth for the first time in my presence, as he laid a hand ever so lightly, yet ever so possessively, on Norn's arm.

"A marvelous intellect—a genius for efficiency!" he said, and I believed him—yet wondering how he could know so soon. And then that thought faded before other thoughts.

He was like Norn! Norn was a good six feet tall, and slender, yet showing, somehow, steel-like strength in every fiber; long-limbed and rangy; awkward with her feet and hands, I know now, though my childish idolatry did not permit that observation then; awkward of foot and hand and wrist and ankle, as though those hands were made for no ordinary tasks, in their long-boned strength, as though the shoes she wore never quite did justice to the freedom of the stride which ought to be hers. And Mr. Wolf was like that too, well over six feet, and thin with a steel-like, rangy strength. His jaws and facial bones were long and clearly cut, and his hands and feet seemed somehow a little out of the picture, a little out of place—no such thought of Norn's feet and hands had entered my mind *then;* but even then I noticed that characteristic of Mr. Wolf's. There was a queerness of Norn's voice, very low and husky for a woman's, which I found in his voice also, and because I loved the sound of Norn's voice I conceded that Mr. Wolf's voice was beautiful. And there was a likeness in their eyes—a steady coldness of gaze, a likeness of pupil—Mr. Wolf's eyes were a lightish, amber brown, but the pupils, like Norn's, were enormous, and did not change or alter in the slightest degree.

It was a partnership that was to last and be life-long, and though I saw that similarity, and though I admired Mr. Wolf, I hated the thought of it then. And when they all went west together,

driving in Mr. Wolf's low-hung, gray car, I cried days and nights until my eyes were swollen day-long and my pillow wet night-long, and I could eat nothing Mother fixed for me.

She cured me—Mother—by giving me a kitten, after the storm had spent itself. I felt it was silly of me to be so won by a ball of gray and white fluff, to learn laughter again from the kitten's crazy antics. But I was only eleven, and little girls whose hearts have been broken are so babyish, so peculiarly their mother's again, for just a little while.

A YEAR later we visited the west coast. That visit was the first real horror of my life.

Norn resented our coming, or rather she resented my mother's presence. She would have been glad to have me, but she did not want her. I wondered what was wrong with my mother, why she was so unwelcome. I looked down on her for not being desirable in Norn's eyes. The old fascination had reasserted itself in me with terrific strength. I was eleven now, nearly twelve; and people said that I was a very beautiful young girl. I had hair darker than Mother's, which curled naturally, and black-lashed dark eyes which I knew held a good deal of expression and appeal. Strangers talked about my coloring and said that I was like the second part of my name, Mary Rose. I would look in the glass and wonder what it was that made them notice me. I looked so ordinary beside Norn, who was wearing expensive clothes now that made her appear very distinguished and exotic, besides being exquisitely groomed. In my adolescent acuteness of perception I noticed for the first time that queer awkwardness of hand and foot which she could not overcome; but it drew me to her, that one so overwhelming should condescend to a human imperfection, as I thought of it. I noticed, too, rather in spite of myself, a something raucous in the husky voice, and though my ears were very sensitive, I grew used to that again, as I had been used to it in my childhood. I saw the coldness and hardness in the fixed, gray gaze more clearly, and that did fascinate and draw me with all the greater power—because those great gray eyes glowed on my face with a yearning, possessive sort of hunger, when we sat and talked alone in the twilight. (Norn hated lights, and would never have turned on a light in evening or dark night if she had lived by herself.)

Afterward, Norn said that everything was my mother's fault, and my mother, who turned against Norn at last, said that everything was Norn's fault. There was a terrific fight one morning, over some trivial domestic detail. It was a holiday, and on holidays Norn always gave everybody directions as to just what they were to do. I know that at first I thought it was about nothing, and suddenly voices rose and rose, till I could hardly tell what they were talking about, but Norn was—actually—ordering my mother to leave, to get out of the house, telling her she was not wanted there. My mother seemed to be reproaching Norn with memories of the old days when she had rather mothered her — but Norn said Mother was getting personal and not telling the truth, and that she was a liar. Then Mother called Norn a liar, and suddenly Norn seemed to leap out of herself. I can think of no other phrase.

She seemed to lengthen out, to tower even taller, to grow beyond the natural size of any woman. She did leap forward, but it was something more than that. It was like the unleashing of a thing in prison. It was a cold, violent, elemental fury that was not like any anger I had ever seen. It was more like—far

more like—the dart of a lightning-bolt out of a storm-racked sky.

It seemed to me that she struck Mother in the face, and that Mother struck blindly, without hitting Norn at all. It seemed that Norn knocked her down, or threw her to the floor, that she was actually hanging over her, crouching down in a posture not like any I had ever seen a human being assume. . . .

There was a shifting and a changing. Was it the actual picture in that room, or in my swimming sense-perceptions, or in my mind itself? Certainly the room had changed—other people had come into it. Mugsie and Ralph, little Dottie — my Uncle Robert, who had turned up in town a few days before.

Norn was standing erect, now, her thin, finely chiseled lips drawn back over her rather large, even white teeth, her breath coming hard, her eyes for once seeming dilated beyond their wont. And my mother was lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, sobbing—and she was too large a woman to lie in a crumpled heap, and, after one look in Norn's eyes, I was ashamed of my mother.

"You all saw! I never lose control of myself. My nerves are iron. I had nothing to do with this. She flew at me and I pushed her away, and she threw herself down there, as no decent woman would, in a neurotic tantrum. No one can have any respect for her, after this, in this whole family."

I was watching Norn as she turned that steady, cold gaze into the eyes of each person in the room in turn—she had looked into my eyes first of all. She looked last at little Dot. And I was more ashamed of my mother than ever, as she scrambled awkwardly to her feet, the very personification of futile, embarrassed, outraged and uncomprehending rage. I saw them all, as they looked back at Norn. It reminded me of stories of mediæval days, when allegiance was sworn to some mighty queen without the need of a spoken word.

My mother and I returned to the East and to my father, and soon after that we bought the home that was ours through the years of my growing up. This was a darling little house with a shingled top which stood on a hill surrounded by beautiful trees, and which seemed deeply endeared to my spirit from the first day they brought me to see it. We were all three happy there in spite of the fact that sentiment had long since died between my mother and father —young as I was, I felt the coming of a greater peace into our home after the pretenses and demands of their youth had definitely failed between them. Those two were mismated, but there was something essentially sound in those days in my father's nature, and there was an infinity of sweetness and fineness in Mother, and with greater maturity the two of them achieved, with me, a lovely home. I remember yet how happily the flames seemed to play in the wide brick fireplace, as though they were a sort of bright and shining genius of the place.

And I remember how sweetly and naturally, here, my nature blossomed into love.

Kerry Shane was the fulfilment of life, to me, and I married him, in my early twenties, and went away with him—with frequent visits home during the five years of our life together. When he died suddenly, of a cramp taken while swimming in the surf of the south Long Island shore, I took our baby and went home to live. My baby was a girl, named after me —Mary Rose. Kerry had called me Rose, without the Mary, and sometimes it was Rosebud. He said I reminded him always of very young, of incurably young things, like a rosebud or the crescent moon. Not

that that has anything to do with my story, which is more the story of Norn, and not that kind of thing.

Mother had been all broken up over my marriage, which had taken the center out of the home she had finally welded so finely together. Now she was broken by Kerry's death, in feeling that the whole thing—my marriage—had been futile—agonizing to her, and ending in heartbreak for me. She resented my grief, which I could not altogether conceal, wanting me back in my old, untouched girlhood. She turned to little Mary Rose in passionate devotion, but she was never quite herself, it seemed to me, and six months after Kerry's death she died too, of a cold which had seemed very trivial.

As for me, I had, long before her passing, achieved a considerable degree of contentment, except for worrying about her. Kerry, it seemed to me, was not so very far away from me. I seemed to see rifts of light in the heavy curtain men call death—these are things impossible to explain, but very real to me. I still loved the house on the hill, set around by fine trees. And I idolized, worshipped and adored little Mary Rose, who looked at me out of eyes that were mine—and his—thus eternally united. I could picture a long life of happy usefulness, nurturing, guiding, launching and always loving little Mary Rose.

I shall never forget the night Dan Reavers called with a woman he said he wanted me to meet.

"This is an incomparable honor for you, Mary Rose," Dan said to me. "Mrs. McDonald never goes out to people's homes professionally. They come to her and pay well enough for that. She likes me—I don't know why.

"I told her about you—about your bereavement, Mary. I thought—perhaps I thought she'd have a message from Kerry, though she never knows whether she will or not, or just what she will get. Anyhow—something seemed to be driving me, fairly, to see that you two met—and here in your home."

At Mrs. McDonald's suggestion we sat silently for a while, in a darkened room, my father being away. And she did speak of Kerry, dreamily, giving me several messages that surprized me, rather.

But what she said of Kerry was only in line with thoughts that seemed to come to me directly from him—to stream in upon my life as the light of the sun streams into a darkened corner. And again, it has little or nothing to do with my story. It has to do with my story, that, suddenly, she spoke of the house.

"This house. Mrs. Shane, I wish you could leave it. There are places that are said to have a *genius loci*. That means, there is a spirit of the place, usually benevolent, sometimes not; and if it is evil, it is hard to prevail against it—to be good or happy there, or even—safe."

She paused. I burst impetuously into speech. I loved our old house!

"This house is not like that, Mrs. McDonald. We've been—in spite of the things life brings—we've been happy here."

"I know that, child. But this house is not the kind of place I just described, but its direct opposite. There is another kind of place which is a sort of focussing-point for whatever enters there. You and all of yours have been, in varying degrees, spirits of the light. Good, and not evil souls have crossed this threshold, and it has, when life's normal rhythm flowed through its walls, heightened the brightness of its current.

"But the people who have dwelt here are ordinary people—you, Mrs. Shane, very psychic, but with undeveloped powers; your mother, your husband, bright spirits a little psychic too—not quite so

much. Your baby—only a baby as yet. Your father—there's something undefined. . . .

"Something else is coming into this place. I feel the creeping of a long, cold shadow. Something dark. Something cruel. A sinister thing. Can't you stop it, Mrs. Shane? Do you know what—whom—I mean?

"No." She answered herself. "You'll know soon, but you won't be able to stop it. Paths cross where they are fore-ordained to cross. Too much love is a challenge to the powers of darkness, Mary Rose—and there has been much love in your life. Your husband loved you as few women are loved—and still loves, across the narrow Border. Still his love reaches you. Your baby adores you, and your poor mother loved you too much for this world. You will understand what I say better than I can—know."

Her breathing was growing irregular. I thought, with a little fear, that she might be about to go into a trance. But she seemed to will herself out of that, and continued more steadily.

"Get away if you can, Mrs. Shane. If you can't—for money reasons, for instance—be warned, and always ready to leave. Someone is coming who has dark powers, and this place will reflect those powers, concentrate and magnify them like a burning-glass. It is a focal point, and will develop what is latent, make a true adept of one who is maliciously uncertain and stumbling. Someone is coming, and you will know who. At least, it is better to be warned."

MY MOTHER had been dead only six weeks, then, but it was on the next day that Father told me he was going to marry Norn. I did not at once think of, or remember, the evening before, or Mrs. McDonald, but I know that his words shocked me—startled, even frightened me. And that is odd, because I had long ago put down that scene between Mother and Norn as being Mother's fault. People didn't knock people down, leap at them, crouch over them. Norn had let me see, before we left, that she still loved me. She had wanted me. She had told me I would be happier with her, asked me to ask my mother to give me to her. We had had whispered talks, huddling together in the dusk, before I went away with Mother out of that keen sense of duty a child so often knows, and is so seldom credited with having.

I ought to have said, too, that in keeping with the great vein of generosity she often manifested—or perhaps partly because, as she scrambled ignominiously from the floor at Norn's feet that day long ago, Mother too had looked deeply into her eyes—Mother had let me visit Norn. Always and always the old domination had reasserted itself. I was a child worshipping at a shrine. . . .

And now I know that is the reason for the sick shrinking of my heart at my father's words.

I had been a child, worshipping at a shrine; but I was no child, now. I was a woman — baptized to womanhood by love, and by the birth of a child, and by bereavement. Perhaps it took all of those three to weld my soul to what it was now —a thing that stood alone, fairly its own creature, and looked back at the Norn of my childhood with the eyes of a woman. She could not, again, dominate me—not even so much as she had dominated my mother. I did not want her to dominate my baby. And I remembered that she had always disliked or scorned women—reduced them to a sort of slavery, as she did with Mugsie, or hated them as she had Mother. She would hate me, and I would still be myself, owning and knowing incurably my unchangeable self and soul, refusing to be swallowed up and

diminished to nothing. And she would be my stepmother, and—all at once I knew this—the thing that was really wrong with Father was, you couldn't trust him. He could be made into almost anything, but not by a daughter. It would take woman's hands, *his woman's hands,* and not hands like my mother's that had not cared either to mold or to caress him. Norn, though — she could mold him into any shape. Yes, into any shape.

I shuddered in the June air. And it was only after that, that I remembered Mrs. McDonald's words last night. I had been shocked out of remembrance of lesser things.

ONE midsummer day Norn came to our house on the hill. Father had met her in a strange city half-way between the coasts, and now he brought her home. It was an hour of golden twilight, when they came up to the porch. Mary Rose—brown curls all over her head, running and talking and a perfect darling nearly two years old, now—was crawling in a last shaft of sunlight. And suddenly that ray of light faded, and it was dark. Clouds coming up in the west? Oh, yes, of course, it was perfectly natural, but I say that our place was altered in that moment. The tall trees told secrets that they had not known a moment before. All their whispering had been kindly, and they had stood like guardians around the house. They were guardians no longer. Aloof, stern, ready—*hoping*—to look on tragedy. What tragedy, I wondered? And my heart whispered: "Something is going to happen here."

At the steps, Norn paused and looked deep into my eyes. She had aged—and developed. Truly, there was something timelessly unchanging about the tall, thin woman standing there in the dusk. Her eyes gleamed, and her teeth—she had perfect teeth, I saw. The lines of her mouth were set and firm as of old—but had they been so cruel?

Her eyes held mine, compelling them to a reply. And I gave the reply in spite of myself. I wanted to fool her, to play for time. I wanted to rear little Mary Rose nicely, not to skimp on her food and clothes and doctor's bills and future education—those things, living on in this house would mean to me. Could I do it? I could try, and I wanted to veil my eyes from Norn. But my eyes were always true mirrors of my thoughts, I know; and they were then. In her eyes I saw the knowledge grow—the knowledge that she could bully, but not dominate; frighten, but not absorb; dictate without conquering. All I wanted in the whole, wide world was freedom of soul, and a safe and happy future for little Mary Rose; Norn wanted — what darkly, deeply schemed, strange things? Complete dominion of my father's every thought, she wanted. And that she would have. She wanted more. . . .

Her eyes left mine, furious in defeat, and turned upon my child. And little Mary Rose cringed back, trembling, and ran to me and clung to me.

"You haven't taught her very pleasant manners!" Norn said abruptly, and passed on into the house. My father lingered behind her.

"If you can't get that child to behave respectfully and politely, you'll have to begin to spank her. Spanking doesn't hurt——"

"I do spank her. I spank her hard, when she does things that will hurt her. I spanked her three times for turning on the gas heater. She's a little too young to make pretend to like people——"

"She's not too young to learn manners!"

It was the first of my bitter arguments—bad for me, and bad for Mary Rose,

the child. But within a month Norn had won so much of Mary Rose's heart that I trembled. And my trembling was not jealousy. I was afraid of Norn, in a queer, wordless way. . . .

JUNE passed and July came, and it was a hot July; a month of drought.

And near the end of that month we had company. Mr. Wolf, like Norn unchanged, except to be older and harder-looking, driving a still longer, lower-hung, gray car, and bringing with him Norn's favorite niece with whom she had lived out these long years—little Dottie. Little Dottie no more, as I remembered her, but changed—so strangely. Not intensified, but altered. Sly, where she had been candid. Something almost rodent, in her blond, red-lipped face under the perfect blond marcel. To look at her made me feel sick, remembering the child she had been; made me brood by little Mary Rose when she was asleep, longing to keep her close, to hold her spirit close to my spirit. For Dorothy now was a shell of something left tenantless, and operated by something alien from without—or so it seemed to me.

About this time we all went to see *Rasputin and the Empress*. And I think the picture precipitated things for us. To me it was so horrible—the sinister altering and absorbing of the innocent child-spirit of the young prince by the hypnotic powers of Rasputin. I was looking for jobs, for apartments, furnished rooms—and a telephone call came for me from one of the men I had interviewed about a position, and the message came into Norn's hands.

When she gave it to me, I knew that it was the beginning of the end of some pretense that had been between us. And I wanted to move that very day, but waited. Positions that paid anything at all were almost non-existent, and I was still hoping for something better than I had found.

Night came, and it was the night of the full moon. In the room I shared with little Mary Rose, the air was motionless, and almost too hot to breathe. Outside the windows, the black leaves hung on the boughs of the trees, motionless. Those trees seemed weighted down with doom, hushed, expectant.

Mary Rose was restless in her sleep tonight, and a beam from the moon kept reaching her face, her closed eyelids. I moved and shifted her bed, but I could not push it far from the window on so hot a night. I thought the direct moonlight was bad for her, and perhaps making her moan and toss. But there was nothing I could do about it, and at last I fell into an exhausted sleep.

It was midnight by my watch when I woke suddenly. I glanced, instantly and instinctively, as every mother does, at my child. And her bed was empty.

My heart thudded heavily, sick with terror. Mad fears of kidnappers hurtled dizzily into my mind. I ran, heavily, like a person in a nightmare, into the hall. And then I saw my little Mary Rose.

There was a window in the curve of the stairway, and the moon shone in there on her, as she made her way—slowly and falteringly—down the stairs. I called to her:

"Mary Rose! Rose! You're sleep-walking. Don't fall."

I had made my voice very soft, as I hurried toward her.

"I'll take you back to bed. Into Mother's bed. We'll cuddle, till you go sound back to sleep. Mother will pin you in so you don't get away again."

I shall never forget the face she turned on me in the moonlight—and she was not two! There was something in that little, baby face that was utterly an anachronism. It was not merely hate, though that was

there too. It was a sense of outrage—as though I were a stranger, say, tearing her from her mother's arms, and pretending to be her mother. I have imagined that, of course. I do not know whether it would be possible for any child to look again as I saw my own child look that night. I know that I got clearly the message of her baby mind, which was that she was through with me (at less than two years old!); that she was going—God knew where—to do her own little will—God knew what!

It made me sick, as the thought of kidnappers had made me sick. But I was her mother, of course, and I did not falter. I knew there was something here that I must get at the roots of. To have caught her in my arms, dragged her to our room, spanked her into submission, pinned her into bed—this would all have been possible. I did not think it the thing to do.

"You'll have to tell me where you want to go, Mary Rose." I kept my voice steady, but defiance shrilled in her baby voice.

"To Norn. I want to go with Norn."

"Go where?"

Slyness. On a baby face. That was another thing I had never seen.

"Maybe nowhere, Muvver. Maybe to sleep with her. I want Norn. Then, when she does go somewhere, I want to go too."

"But *is* she going somewhere?"

"I don't know. Oh, no, no, no!" (An old baby phrase of impatience.) "Norn told me I could come to her *any time*. This Norn's house. She said so. Norn! Norn!"

My aunt came hurrying out of the room she shared with my father.

"I think you're demented, Mary." (We had all rather dropped the last part of my name, leaving it for my baby; and Mary always meant me.) "I think you're utterly insane. You mistreat this child horribly. She should be taken from you. Some day, I'll see you can't torment her any more. You're insanely jealous; a cruel mother. She wants to come to me in the middle of the night—and no doubt you know better than I, what you did to her to make her run away from you. Children don't do such things without reason. She wants to sleep with me anyway. She has said so. Well, I'm taking her over tonight. I'm her best friend, and she knows it. Go back to your room, Mary, and let the child alone. You'll sleep without her now——"

My nerves broke.

"I will not! I'll keep her, Norn! She's my baby—you can't do this——"

My father came out of the dark doorway of their room, rotund in his pajamas.

"I've been listening to this! You'll sleep where and how you're told to, in this house. If you want to go on seeing that child, you behave yourself. I'll support Norn's statement. No child runs crying from her mother in the dead of night without reason. You're a troublemaker. Norn and I bear witness for each other in everything——"

Was there a mad glitter in his eyes? So rapt, so obedient to her will, yet so violating the fatherhood that must lie dormant in his breast. Yes, he could be made into—anything. Norn could do it. . . .

The best thing to do—the best thing to do. They were on the verge of taking Mary Rose right out of my hands. Then if I planned to go away, even a day later, it might be too late. They would stand together on any story—railroad me into an asylum? That, I knew, was the backlog of their thoughts; and I remembered hearing Norn tell outsiders, calmly and regretfully, that Mary Rose was not the same since her double bereavement. I wasn't insane. I'd welcome alienists—

then I shuddered. Suppose they got me separated from Mary Rose, got her utterly alienated—and that she already was. I had stood a good deal. How much more could I stand?—I had studied psychology in college. I remembered the simile of the weak cart and the shallow mudhole, the stout cart and the deep mudhole. Well, my mental cart was stout enough, and proven over and over; but this hole was pretty deep—deep as they could make it. . . .

God! How little I knew that they could dig a pit under my very feet, which would be bottomless, a slimy gateway to the depths of hell!

So quickly it happened. There are not words for the lightning speed of the next moments. . . .

As though aroused by our commotion, two others appeared with silent swiftness. Mr. Wolf and Dorothy, from their respective rooms in the other wing of the house. And they all drew together, facing me. All together against me. All staring at me. And none of them looking—quite right—quite natural. . . .

My baby Mary Rose was clinging to Norn's hands. Her baby face was upturned, worshipfully, to that dark, long-jawed, sharply cut countenance. Before my eyes, Norn stooped to the baby and kissed her. Such a kiss! Never on this earth, I hope, has woman kissed child like that. Something was being given and taken—and the upturned baby face seemed to swim in a veritable swoon of rapturous response. I could have fainted where I stood, but my shrinking gaze, which I could no longer bear to keep upon my child, dimly comprehended the look on Dorothy's face. Dorothy hated little Mary Rose for that caress. Dorothy would like to kill Mary Rose. . . .

Mr. Wolf's eyes were on Dorothy. He would do anything she liked. His moment was to come. . . . And did I say they all looked—*unnatural?* It was like the old nursery tale. "But, grandmother, how long your teeth are!" "The better——"

I remembered a very horrible murder story I had read, which was based on psychological workings out of old nursery rimes. And I remembered something else.

My adult reading had carried me far into the field of ancient superstitions. Now my reason seemed toppling, as the possible reality of some of these swept into my reluctant mind. Lycanthropy—wasn't it?—where certain Things could be in turn human in form and animal—and bore always the stamp of some ferocious monster traits of nature? Lycanthropy—that was it!

And as I watched those awful changes—the dizzy swimming of the air between us, through which I yet saw clearly the fast-changing, definite outlines—Norn, growing in stature, assuming a leaping posture—her face reaching out before her, the long jaw still elongating, the fixed pale glare of her wide eyes with the unchanging pupils now seeming to come to life, to shoot red sparks. . . . The long arms hanging down, now, before her—those strangely awkward feet and hands seeming at last at ease, wildly graceful, *the hands turning to wolf's paws.* . . .

Mr. Wolf, changing similarly, instant by instant. Dorothy—no, she was not a wolf. She was a sly little fox, and had dropped to all fours.

My frantic gaze sought my father's face. Not he, not he!

No. He was what he had been. A man, angry, opinionated, rotund. His easily led nature too flaccid, too plastic, perhaps, to take on any horrific alteration. But he would not, even now, sustain or support my cause. He had done what

they would have wanted him to do, *what they had doubtless imposed upon his subconscious mind to do.* He had simply fallen asleep. My single frenzied scream did not reach his ears. He was leaning in the angle of the balustrade—and as I looked, he slipped quite simply and easily to the floor. And it came to me, that if these devils did not tear me to pieces, they could do a worse thing—they could reassume human form at will, I was sure, as I was sure that many times before they had gone into these more elemental expressions of their natures. And they could laugh at me, and sneer at me, and know that my first desperate outcry against them, my first accusation of their being the things they were, would put me for ever behind the bars. Away from little Mary Rose!

And now I plunged into the ultima thule of horror.

Here and there the moon shone in through the windows of the dark lower story rooms, and from polished floor and furniture and light walls and ceilings a dim diffusion of its light made barely visible the gaunt form which hurled itself furiously down upon me. It was that one of the transfigured three which had worn Norn's features, which still showed a dim likeness to her: the smaller of the two monster wolf-things. And in my nightmare shock I was overtaken and overwhelmed by its first plunge. I fought my way backward, falling, falling. . . .

And how can I describe the uncanny dreadfulness of what I must try to make clear? The change from woman to wolf was yet only partial. Something was lacking—later I knew what it was that was still required to make the woman all wolf, till the rising beams of tomorrow's sun should restore the more common and original form. At any rate, it was the more concrete, physical manifestation which was not yet altered to the semblance of the beast, and to this I owe my life. Over me, muzzle near my face, eyes gleaming red in the dusky gloom, bent the wolf-head. I *saw* the claws that tore at my face and body—but what I felt was the large, bony hands of a woman, tearing and clawing as the claws of the beast should have done, but so much more ineffectually that I was not mangled, as the evidence of my sense of sight told my frantic brain from second to second I was about to be mangled.

Those claws tore at my face, and I felt scratches; but only the scratches of fingernails. Bony fingers closed around my left eyeball in its socket, as though they would tear it from its place. It was the sort of attack which could only be made by human hands and fingers prompted by the workings of a mind gone down to the level of a beast. Then, just as I uttered a despairing cry at the sharpness of the pain shooting from the back of my eyeball to the top and back of my head, the grip shifted, and brutish hands, that still were only hands, tore at my breast, and beat and tore and mauled at my body. I screamed out loud, and a tiny form was upon me—my little girl, rushing to my defense in spite of the spell that was upon her. The hands loosed their hold, and I staggered to my feet, circled, crouched low, got away—and dashed through the rooms of the dark and silent house.

A tiny white form leaped away before me—little Mary Rose, running madly, I suppose, wild with terror, from all of us now. And I followed, with the sound of running feet behind me. And as the pack crossed a broad band of moonlight on the black floor, the sound of those following footsteps changed—awfully. It was now the clatter of claws that sounded on the polished floor, and to be overtaken by them now meant instant death.

In the kitchen I snatched from a table

a sharp-bladed paring-knife that lay in a shaft of moonlight. And I half fell over something wet and slippery, as the arc made by my hand knocked down something else from that table that broke at my feet, spilling liquid.

WHAT happened now was more horrible to me than all that had gone before. The little white figure of the flying child uttered a queer, choking cry, and rushed for the spot where the gurgle and splash had been. I saw her, prostrate on the floor, sensed that the little face went down, heard the sucking of eager little lips——

And heard another most unchildish cry, as the little thing got to her feet again. Those following monsters had paused as I paused, no doubt in exultation. Now we all flew forward again, the child ahead, I trying to overtake her and to escape myself. . . .

We circled once more through the silent house and flew out over the doorsill, and I felt the hot breath of one of the following monsters.

And as the clear light of the full moon touched my child, she dropped to all fours—a tiny, perfect wolf-cub. Straight for the forest that lay the length of a city block away, she sped. And I knew with a terrible sense of loss like the sense of loss I had felt at Kerry's death —that she would never come back to me. As she ran with the swift patter of tiny claws on the hard path, I could hear her whimpering. And yet she ran straight and fast—faster than I could go. My heart labored desperately. I had read of these dreadful transmutations. At dawn those other monsters would resume human form. They would, if by any chance I had escaped death from them, love the game of baiting me to madness that they would carry on. They might even spare me for the sake of that game, if their brute fury left them reason after a while. They would love the conflict of wits, the utter deceitfulness of it, as all things evil love darkness and guile.

But little Mary Rose with the dawn would be an outcast. She would know instinctively that she had crossed a dark threshold. She still would run from me, hide from me. With what seemed like a clear vision, I actually seemed to see what would happen when dawn came to her in the little wood to which she was running for sanctuary. There was a narrow, rather deep, very muddy little stream in that wood. I could see a little body floating, a little upturned face for ever quiet. . . .

And I ran faster.

The scratch and thud of heavy, shaggy forms rising and falling on rough padded paws and scraping claws came nearer. I could feel a fetid breath fanning my shoulder. I knew the foretaste of death.

And a small, yellow body flashed by me, and I heard snarls of rage, and the pack swept by me, one huge body knocking me from my feet. Even as I scrambled up, I sensed that the immediate interest of the brutes, more imperative even than the destruction of me, their enemy, was the flying little cub ahead. And I knew a flash of sheer telepathy such as most of us have experienced in moments of desperate stress, in dealing with our kind. These were not my kind —but their instincts were primal in their force, and I felt their impact.

I had known that Dorothy hated little Mary Rose, because she was jealous of Norn's love for her. And I had known that Mr. Wolf had turned from Norn to the blond young girl Dorothy. And now the yellow fox wanted to kill the little cub, and the largest wolf was ready to help. But the other wolf actually loved the little cub, would fight for its life, that she might make her into the unholy

thing she herself had become, that she might know her comradeship in evil adventures. . . .

The yellow fox was closing in on the cub, and the huge timber wolf was ahead. Desperately I felt the knife in my hand, and raised my arm. And I seemed to hear Kerry's voice. It may, of course, have been the projection of my own sound instinct, a hallucination founded on reason. I do not know. But what I seemed to hear him say, was this:

"If you throw the knife at the wolf or the fox, you will kill whichever one you aim at, for this night your aim is as true as your need is desperate. Don't—don't! Morning will make the dead body back into the human shape it must wear by day, and you will be accused by the others. And the little cub will get away.

"Throw at the cub! Hold the knife by the blade, and throw handle first. It is the only way."

I obeyed—as I should have obeyed if Kerry had stood at my side—as perhaps he did stand there. I shall never know that—but I obeyed what seemed to come to me clothed in his words, uttered by his voice. And my aim was true, and the little cub gave a little moan, and dropped upon the path.

The yellow fox leaped at it, and the huge wolf closed in to help the fox. But the other wolf uttered a cry that was strangely human, after all, and closed with the larger wolf, and they fought and tore each other there in the moonlight, till drops of blood flew through the air and splashed warm on my face and bare arms.

The yellow fox must have been hurt in the mêlée, for it gave a cry of pain and bounded away, toward the forest. And I came to as the blood touched my shrinking flesh—for it was like the touch of something unspeakably unclean. I crept to where the little cub was lying, for the smaller wolf, fighting desperately for her life, had forced the battle a little away from it. And did I catch the gleam from those mad, beast's eyes, of a brief, but piteous entreaty? I thought I did. But I forgot everything but the little cub as I reached it, and gathered it in my arms.

It was stunned, but I could see that it breathed, and I uttered a prayer of thankfulness. I ran back toward the house through the moonlight, hearing that awful clamor behind me, feeling death in the air. At least we were safe while the brutes fought. At the house I could lock myself in till morning. With morning, there would be only human things to contend with, and later I must get away.

I felt my eyes swimming with hot tears. The sight of that grotesque little head lying on my arm. The wolf-head—of my child. Dawnlight! Did it always bring the metamorphosis? I was not sure.

I REACHED the house and crept up the stairs. On the landing my father still slept, unless he had died in that heavy stupor. I did not pause, but gained my own room and laid my burden down on my own bed and knelt beside it. And through the night I prayed, and with the dawn it came—the heavenly change of the beast back to the likeness and being of the child I loved!

I went out of our room then, carrying her in my arms, and she nestled to me as though she knew how nearly we had been parted for ever.

In the lower hall I met my father, worried, querulous, old-looking in the dawnlight.

"I've looked for Norn everywhere. I can't find her. Last night you were quarreling with her—we'll have no more of that, in this house!" he said. "She'll take over the care of the little girl. She is so wise, so efficient. You're always upset, you know. Norn has warned me that

she believes you are going to get to the point of actually seeing hallucinations. You will have to be looked after, but we won't have you looking after your baby any more. But where—where is Norn?"

"When you fell asleep——" I began.

"I fainted," he corrected me irritably. "Your quarreling with Norn was too much for me. Don't do it again."

"I won't!" I promised light-heartedly. I was becoming increasingly sure that Norn would never return. Something about the house told me so—my own house again, protecting and sheltering me and my child. The very look of the morning sunlight, the sound of the birds in the tall, whispering trees, were telling me good tidings. I felt sure the monsters would never come back—would never come back. I felt sure. . . .

"After you became entirely unconscious, Mr. Wolf, Dorothy and Norn all went outside—I suppose they wanted to look at the moon. It was beautiful last night.

"Little Mary Rose ran out too, and was running away, and we all went after her. But Norn, Dorothy and Mr. Wolf got into an argument. Dorothy slipped off somewhere by herself—but I left Norn and Mr. Wolf fighting it out, down the path toward the wood. I caught up with Mary Rose and brought her back. I left them fighting——"

My father made one more effort at command.

"Don't say 'fighting'. Show some respect. Mr. Wolf has been Norn's good and lifelong friend, and if they had a disagreement——"

"They had!" I interrupted blithely. "Somehow, I believe you'll have a chance to know where they went if you'll walk down the wood path. Please do. I will get breakfast."

He went away grumbling, and I set the table—for three. But only little Mary Rose and I could eat. It was horrible, what my father found down there, and the events of the next few days were sad and gruesome. But I could not be sorry, and they did not take my appetite. I had been through too much for that.

He found my aunt and her old friend, Mr. Wolf, literally torn to pieces beside the wood path. Some huge animals, escaped from God knew where—there was never a theory advanced to account for the marks on their bodies.

And the little yellow fox never was seen again, nor was my cousin Dorothy. Police searched for months for the yellow-haired girl, and Aunt Mugsie still writes to me sorrowfully about her. I am sorry, desperately sorry for Aunt Mugsie. Even to think of losing a child of one's own——

I KNOW that I ought to close this record with a word of explanation; not to explain away what actually happened—not to throw up a smoke screen, to pretend to offer any alternate theory to the dreadful conjectures such things force upon the unwilling mind. There is no sense in such an attempt. I know now, of course, just what is meant by lycanthropy. I know how the old, discredited legends first came into being, on what desperately true phenomena they were based.

I do not know, I do not pretend to know, the exact mechanics of such dire transmutations of being as I unwillingly witnessed. I do not know how far the inner nature of man molds his body, the atoms of which are all thrown off and changed, replaced and altered in their entirety, every seven years. I do not know to what extent the mere giving of one's self to evil may in rare instances effect the working out of alterations beyond anything we have ever suspected or dreamed of.

My personal theory is that Norn was from her birth one of those beings so utterly egoistic (Lucifer, star of the morning!) that she threw herself beyond the pale of common motives, common guidances and inspirations. We all blunder and sin; but deep in most of us is an occasional humility, a yearning desire to be better. To these, I believe Norn was a stranger.

Mr. Wolf was different—how different, I shall never know. He was perhaps the product of some older race, some strange admixture of races, even—a sort of human chemical compound fraught with the dangers of a high explosive. He had lived in far parts of the world, become an adept of forbidden knowledge. He had tutored Norn, made her what he himself was—and, after her, Dorothy. The difference between the fox and the wolves was, I think, one of inherent, inborn characteristics. Little Dottie had been so innocent—yet not, perhaps, ever brilliant or over-strong of nature. She wasn't capable of the ferocities of those others—but, degraded and perverted by their machinations, she, too, slipped downward into that form of animal life she could achieve.

I gathered up and studied the shards of the container I had broken that night on the kitchen floor, and I know, of course, that the liquid it held, of which little Mary Rose drank before the change came upon her, must have been an essential part of the transmutation from human form into that of the beast. The light of the full moon also did its part. The characters and carving on the outer and inner curvatures of the shards were not very distinguishable, but in some way that I can not explain, they frightened me. I buried them—deep. And I have planted violets over the place where they are buried.

Fear: A Fantasy

By WILMA DOROTHY VERMILYEA

I saw a gray shape walking in the night,
Nor did I dream;
It crossed the vineyard, passed along the hill
And stirred the stream,
And when it moved across the wheat like light
All men stood still.

I heard no footsteps, yet I saw a throng
Of marching things
That leering followed where the pale form led
On noiseless wings—
And not a wheat-ear where they passed along
Was harvested.

A Visitor from Far Away

By LORETTA BURROUGH

A dreadful horror hung over Mrs. Bowen for twenty years, and then—but read this story for yourself

THE wind was scooping great whining hollows in the air, whirling the snow against window-panes and frosted roof of Laurel House, piling it deep upon projecting cornices, rolling it into soft white drifts on the unprinted path to the front door. It was very still within the house; the hinges of a loose shutter squealed, groaned, worked up to a terrific bang against the wooden walls, squealed again.

It was so silent that to the woman lying quiet and nervous in the bed, the page she was turning seemed to shout hoarsely as it slipped back against its fellows, although she knew it had only whispered beneath her thumb. She was reading a book on astronomy, but as time passed she found it harder and harder to think about stars, harder to remember that they were shining somewhere beyond this blizzard in all the veiled brightness of their galaxies.

It was the knowledge that she was alone in the house, completely solitary, that frightened her. There were too many rooms beyond whose empty lighted windows (lighted by her as darkness fell, to cheat that dark) the pale white storm dipped and swayed. Ever since the Occurrence—that was how she phrased it to herself, as though it had been an eclipse, or an earthquake—she had taken good care not to be without a friend or servant in her house at night. Solitude was an invitation to those dreadful and oppressive thoughts that would sometimes descend upon her like a dark hawk even in the midst of a crowd's gayety; but more apt to happen—oh much more!—in solitude. And although the source of those thoughts lay twenty years back, and Mrs. Bowen at forty-five did not look in any way like Mrs. Bowen at twenty-five, they were one and the same and therefore subject to bad dreams and a strange horror of being left alone.

Mrs. Bowen closed her book and threw it aside, lay there a moment listening to the high-pitched voice of the storm, and then turned to look at the pink enameled face of the French clock on her dresser. Since she had last looked, time had crept on, turning the soft ticking into minutes, into half an hour; the small fragile hands pointed to a quarter of twelve. Her heart seemed to sink with depression. What was the matter with those intolerable servants! They knew the way she felt about being left alone. "Sure, ma'am," Nora had said, the rosy Irish brogue thick in her voice, "we'll be back quick as ever. If 'tweren't Mother was so sick——" And she had taken her sister in tow behind her, repeating, "We'll be back by ten-thirty, sure." An hour and fifteen minutes late, and not one word from them!

The doctor said this fright of hers, this horror of being alone, was all nonsense. Well, perhaps so, but it was not toward the doctor that Roger's reptilian head had turned that day in the dark shining courtroom, with the rain falling in thunderous torrents outside the windows. It was not to the doctor that Roger

had said, in the moment of silence after the judge's voice sentencing him to life imprisonment for killing his wife's lover had ended, "I'll get even with you. I'll never stop thinking of how to do it. I'll never forget you—or forgive you." No, it had been to her, his wife, that Roger had pointed his long hand that always made her think of a spider, and spoken his ugly words.

Her dark brows contracting, Mrs. Bowen, forgetting now that it was all over long ago, put her hands to her throat with a curious look of terror. She was thinking of Roger and *that* night, months before his trial, when, the smoking empty gun flung away from him, he came at her, his fingers crooked for her throat, filthy names pouring from his lips.

And then, exhaling a deep relaxing sigh, she got out of bed and went to the window. She had been near, that time twenty years back! It had been touch and go for days after their man-servant had broken in and pulled Roger's fingers from her neck. She had testified at the trial gladly, eager to weave a thick strong rope for Roger's death. But they had only given him life imprisonment.

THE curtains pulled behind her, she looked out at the blizzard. The snow seemed very deep, swirling into queer high shapes along the roof edge, like punch-bowls and cardinals' hats. In the light from the windows downstairs the flakes shone like sugar, rising and dipping; she had an oppressive feeling of the vastness of this billowing frozen movement that filled the night. Could it possibly—she sucked in her breath at the thought—be bad enough to keep the servants in the village? And even as she wondered, one hand pressed against the cold pane, the telephone rang in the room behind her.

The sound of the bell was like a gleam of light brightening her dreary thoughts; it suddenly made her again the middle-aged Mrs. Bowen whom everybody imagined a respectable widow, retired, occasionally taking a quiet part in the life of the near-by town, of whom nobody would have believed a connection with murder. Her steps quick across the thick rug, she hastened to answer.

"Ma'am?" That was Nora, her rich Irish voice coming faintly across the crackling wires; the connection was poor. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am, but we can't get out tonight. The snow's that deep! I tried the garage and Haley's taxi stand, everywhere—nobody'd take us—they said 'twas suicide."

Mrs. Bowen was silent for a dark moment before she burst out, "But you girls can't, *can't* leave me alone here all night. It'd be different if George was home." George was her chauffeur, away on a two-weeks' vacation; it would be days before George even bought the return ticket that would bring him ultimately to Laurel House again.

Behind her back, she felt the empty place listening as though it were sardonically amused, the wind drawing away and returning to batter at the walls with a vigorous shout of renewal, the shutter at its unending cycle of squeal and bang. From the corner of her eye, she could see the white face of the snow peering in at her.

"You've got to come," she said, her voice rising. "You've got to come! Walk, if it's necessary."

"Ma'am!" Nora's voice was exasperated beneath its coating of servility. "We couldn't get two feet, ma'am. If you'll just look out the winder—the drifts is terrible. There ain't a car on the roads. Sure God himself couldn't walk it! Maybe tomorrow morning—we'll try hard then."

"Oh, Nora——" she said, despising

herself for pleading, yet unable to stop. She had never been alone all night since *it* had happened twenty years ago; deep in her was this fixation, black with pain —not to be alone with the darkness and the unforgotten past. "Nora," she stumbled on, "I'll double your wages, if you start now and get out here!"

"Ma'am, we couldn't. We couldn't for a million dollars." The voice at the other end sounded protesting and cold. "Nobody can get out of town tonight, ma'am. Why don't you just turn on the radio nice and loud, fix up a little snack to eat, and then go to bed?"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bowen, dropping the receiver back on the hook with a choked groan. It seemed to her that in the few moments she had been talking, the storm had grown worse. The wild sleety rattle of the snow against the windows sounded like unhappy voices complaining of something strange and terrible, beginning to speak of it far away in the white hills, and coming closer and closer until they shouted it against the shingled walls of Laurel House.

"Now," she suddenly said aloud, standing in the middle of the room with her fingers pressed against her forehead, "I'm not going to be an idiot. There's nothing to harm me here; certainly *he* can't harm me here, and that's all I'm afraid of, isn't it?" Disliking the foolish sound of her voice speaking in the emptiness, she stopped. What had Nora said? Turn on the radio, fix herself something to eat, go to bed. But——

The lights flickered; for a moment, the small glowing filaments in the bulbs failed and faded before they burned brightly again; somewhere, distant in the storm, a line had gone down, there had been some trouble.

Mrs. Bowen looked, her mouth quivering, at the room now bright again. That wouldn't do, would it? It wouldn't be very nice if the lights, all the lights, should go out; that would leave her alone in the dark. But there was, she was sure, a candle wrapped in the lower drawer of her dresser. She had it out in a moment, a bright yellow candle, set it in a holder on her dresser and lighted it. *Now* if the current went off—— She saw that her hands trembled.

I'm a fool, she thought, looking at herself in the mirror; it showed a middle-aged woman with a fair, quiet face. It was all because Roger was not, somehow, an ordinary man. The threats of an ordinary man you could meet with laughter, but Roger's threats—his narrow gray eyes, with the look one moment so drowsy, the next so intense, the sharp cruel curving lines of his mouth, the long narrow hands that had always reminded her, because they were dark, crooked, brown and covered with hair, of two spiders crawling—all of Roger made it seem too sure that he had the power to make *his* threats come true.

It gave her pain to remember his face or his words or anything about him; memory of him was like a hand at her throat. She picked up the small French clock from her dresser and began to wind its delicate key, telling herself that when the hands touched twelve again it would be tomorrow and the sun would be shining.

And just as the slight little clicking sounds ceased within the mechanism and she set the clock back in its place, she heard a door open, and close, in the house.

For a moment she stood there, an imperceptible flash of time while her heart did not beat or air move in her lungs, and then she said suddenly, very loud, "Who's that? Is that you, Nora? Katie?" But of course it could not be Nora or Katie because she had been

speaking to Nora only a few minutes ago, and she had said they could not come out. Besides, they could not have reached here from the village in so short a time; even on a fair night in an automobile they could not have made it. Nevertheless—her fingernails dug sharply into her palms, and her head turned slowly, listening—she was no longer alone in the house.

It had not been the wind that had opened and shut that door; although she was hungry to believe it, she knew it had not been the wind. The house was too sound, too solid. No, there was someone else within these walls and she must be sure at once whether it was friend or enemy. Her mouth was a little open; she could hear her breath coming between her lips with a small whistling sound—she could not help thinking that in the intervals when the wind outside sprang up blasting snow against the ringing windows, someone, anyone, could be coming slowly nearer and nearer to her while she could not hear him.

Spasms of cold seemed to sweep over her body as she moved to the dresser, jerked open the top drawer and took up the small revolver she always kept there. With it in her hand, she went to the bedroom door and paused with her fingers on the knob. Suddenly, a feeling of relief came hot and strong into her heart. Of course, of *course!* That was it. In the letter she had received from her chauffeur this morning, he had said he would be back Thursday, and this was only Monday—but he must have changed his plans. This was good sensible George who had come in downstairs, probably half numb with the bitter cold. She would give him the key to the cellaret in the library, and tell him to take some whisky to prevent his getting a chill. She twisted the door-knob.

Puzzled, she stared at the complete darkness beyond the door. Why had he turned out all the lights that she had left so brightly burning downstairs? The sound of sleety snow rattling on the long windows of the hall landing came up to her out of the blackness; an apprehension, formless and vague, seized her heart.

"Is that you, George?" she called. "Did you just come in a moment ago? Answer me, please!"

She waited, breathing quickly, listening to the noise of the storm and the silence of the dark lower house that seemed to be listening too, and then slammed the door shut and locked it quickly. She had just realized that if there were no cars on the road, no foot travelers, because of the blizzard, neither could there have been a George. A few words turned slowly in her mind as she looked at the blank panels: *But it was not the wind! There is someone here; yes, there is someone here.*

And there was nowhere to look for help. Outside the house was nothing but the whirling wastes of drifted snow and the wind that came rushing from the hills. Her eyes, turning here, there, and back again, touched the telephone. The police! They would surely try to come, to one in need.

She hurried across the room, the pearl-handled revolver clutched in her fingers, her ears intent, listening behind her. As she stooped to pick up the instrument, it rang with a sharp jangle beneath her hand.

"Hello, hello!" she cried into the mouthpiece. "Please, will you get the police for me? I want the police—I am all alone in my house and someone has broken in. This is Mrs. Bowen, Mrs. Bowen—Laurel House—please——"

A small voice, distinct and cool, came back. "I'm sorry, the connection is very

bad—they are having trouble with the line. I cannot hear you. I want Mrs. Bowen, I have a telegram for her. Is this Mrs. Bowen? Will you speak louder, please?"

"Yes, yes," she groaned. "But please, I want——"

"I will read your telegram now," the voice went on. " 'Mrs. Roger Bowen, Laurel House, Galeville, Connecticut. Regret to inform you Roger Bowen died suddenly here today. Please wire disposition of body.' Signed Henry Adams, Warden San Marco Penitentiary. This connection is so poor, I'm afraid—there it goes!"

A series of sharp, sputtering clicks and the line went dead, as though it had suddenly frozen under the long piling weight of the snow. And almost as the telephone connection went, the electric lights faded, brightened, dimmed out at last to dark bulbs, and slowly the lighted candle on her dresser seemed to grow stronger in the dimness.

But Mrs. Roger Bowen was not aware of the telephone or the lights. She was watching the candle from the corners of her eyes. It seemed to her that two thin crooked brown hands were slowly descending out of the darkness toward the flaring flame.

The hands made her think—yes, they made her think of two spiders.

The Man on the Platform

By THEODORE TINSLEY

A brief weird tale about a dream that foretold death

ELLA WINSLOW stared at her husband's terrified eyes and tried to smile reassuringly. This can't be happening to Arthur, she thought helplessly; he's too sensible, too matter-of-fact. . . . She said, unevenly, "Eat your toast, dear."

He nodded mechanically, ran a shaky hand through his thick gray hair. His voice frightened her more than his eyes: it was so high-pitched, so utterly convinced.

"But, Ella, the dreams are so real! They always start the same way. Pitch-dark. I can't see a thing. All I know is that I'm standing on a railroad track, cold with fear. I can hear the hum and click of steel rails and I know there's an invisible train rushing toward me at express speed. No bell, no whistle, not a sound. . . . And then, with an ear-splitting shriek of wind, the train rushes right through my body. And instantly, the darkness is gone—I can see clearly. I'm standing in the center of the track, watching myself on the rear platform of that train as it roars away from me. . . ."

"Drink a little more coffee, dear," his wife said gently.

"There are green bushes along the

track," Winslow muttered. "I can see an upright semaphore to indicate that all's clear ahead. I keep waiting for the semaphore to drop, but it never does. I—I thought at first the semaphore was what I was so afraid of. But it isn't that; it's the door—the platform door."

"Try not to think about it, Arthur."

His shrill voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "Each time I've dreamed it, I've seen that rear platform door opening stealthily, inch by inch, behind me. I've known that something was trying to come out, something small and persistent. Last night the—the thing came out. . . . It—it was so small, Ella! Its head barely reached to the knob of the door. It stood there on the platform behind that figure of me. . . . Ella, it—it wants to kill me!"

"You've worked too hard lately, that's all. It's not like you. One of the biggest cotton-goods manufacturers in New York; a tall, good-looking son at Yale; our lovely daughter married to a perfectly grand son-in-law; not a single worry in the whole wide world. . . . And you have to invent a silly dwarf in a conductor's uniform to ruin your digestion and —and"—her calm voice quavered—"and frighten me half to death."

"I'm sorry, Ella." He swung her face to his and kissed her, tremulously.

Watching his shaking fingers as they turned the pages of his morning newspaper, Ella thought: "How thin he has become, how horribly nervous!" She had suspected that something was wrong with him ever since that night six weeks before when Arthur had leaped from bed, wide awake, cringing with terror, fumbling for the light button.

"Nightmare," he had muttered with a strained smile, and had pretended to go back to sleep. Ella knew now that it had been only pretense; he must have lain awake for hours in a cold sweat of fear.

He threw his crumpled newspaper on the table. "It's a warning," he said stonily. "Someone is planning to kill me. A—a dwarf conductor with a chalk-white face and round, staring eyes. There was—blood on his face. . . ."

"It's nine-thirty, Arthur," his wife reminded him unsteadily.

Winslow nodded vacantly. She touched his arm finally, and he shrugged, rose stiffly from the breakfast table and walked into the high-ceilinged living-room. He was placing a thin sheaf of typewritten papers in a leather brief-case when the telephone bell rang. The maid who answered it announced that Philip was waiting downstairs with the car. Winslow relaxed. The maid looked at him queerly; it was not like the master to bark at her so gruffly. She came hesitantly toward him and helped him with his coat.

"Wait!" Winslow said suddenly. "Stop a minute!"

The telephone bell was ringing again.

"I'll answer it," Mrs. Winslow said. . . . "Why, yes; he's still here. . . . Certainly."

She handed the instrument to her husband. "A long-distance call. From Philadelphia."

Winslow talked for a minute or so and hung up. "It was Harrison Crane, reminding me about that plant merger. The details have been ironed out sooner than Crane expected." He stared at his wife, his face suddenly white. "Crane wants me to—to take the train for Philadelphia immediately."

Mrs. Winslow dropped the last pathetic shred of pretense.

"Don't!" she cried anxiously. "Arthur, *don't take that train!* The car is downstairs. Let Philip drive you."

"Damned queer, isn't it?" He smiled haggardly. "Last night, the dream. This morning, the train. I have no intention

of taking the train, Ella." His voice hardened. "I'm going to drive to Philadelphia—and I'm *not* going to take Philip. I want to know who's behind the wheel of my car."

He kissed his wife stolidly. When his jaw was set in that fashion she knew better than to talk further.

"I'll remind him casually about my poor health when he returns," she thought. "I'll suggest to him that we're both tired and need a short sea cruise."

WINSLOW drove with a steady hand. He felt newly released, at peace, grimly exhilarated by the cool rush of the wind. He was at the wheel of his own car—not a helpless atom on a speeding train. He was stronger than the puppet in the dream. A man, with the guiding power to make his own choice. . . . He watched the white concrete ribbon of the Jersey road unrolling endlessly beside him. His car rounded a curve and he straightened it with an easy flick of his wrist.

Suddenly his smiling mouth gaped in frozen horror. Straight ahead of him was the face he had seen in the dream.

He screamed hoarsely, threw a terrified arm upward. The car swerved, crashed through a whitewashed fence, rolled over and over through a screen of bushes and smashed upside down on a railroad track.

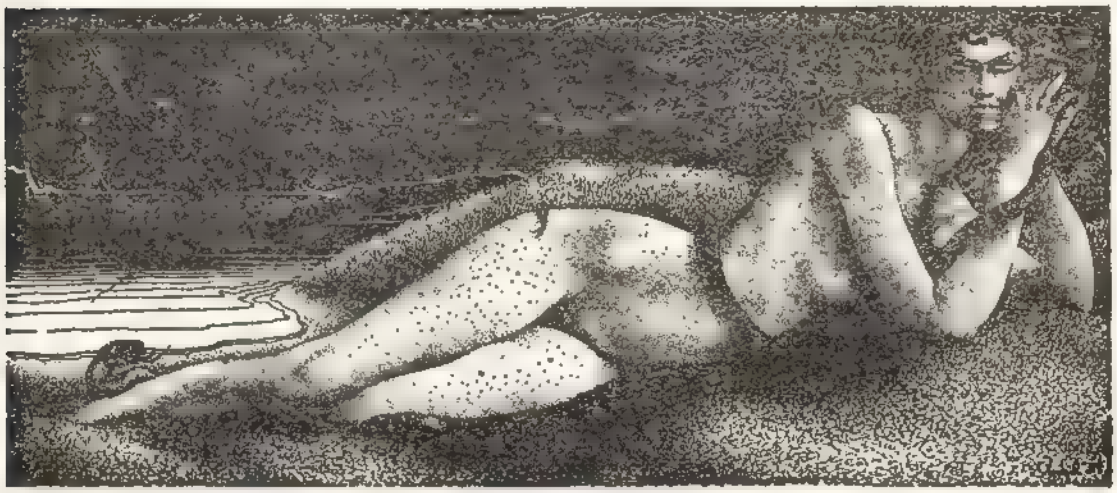
The shining rails were humming faintly. A train had just roared past. The vanishing rear platform was barely fifty yards away. In the clear sunlight a semaphore signal dropped creakingly from vertical to horizontal. . . .

After a while footsteps came stumbling toward the wrecked automobile. Faces peered underneath at the dead man. A voice said thickly: "One minute sooner, and he'd have run smack into the train. He must have been cock-eyed drunk. I saw the whole thing; the kid on the bicycle was on the right side of the road."

The boy's eyes were round, staring. There was blood on his face. His blue messenger's uniform was soiled and torn. "He didn't hurt me much, but—but he broke my bicycle."

The boy began to whimper.

"He broke my bicycle and it's—it's brand-new. I—I bought it only six weeks ago."



A Dream of Death

By ANDREW DAW

Strange was the vision that haunted Raymond in his sleep, and stranger still was its weird denouement

A PIERCING flow of light which caused fantastic shadows to dance grotesquely within his slumber-burdened mind roused Blaine from his sleep. The reading-lamp beside his bed had been switched on and in the outer rim of its glow he saw the pale, haggard face of his nephew.

"What is it, Raymond?" he asked. "Is anything wrong?"

At the sound of Blaine's voice Raymond's lips moved nervously.

"I didn't know you were awake," he mumbled. "I was thinking, trying to decide . . . that is, perhaps I should tell you."

Raymond ceased speaking for a moment. He was sitting in a chair near the bed, making nervous, clawing motions with his hands. His strained face showed clearly how strenuously he was trying to become calm. Gradually he gained control over his agitation. At last he said quite composedly, "I want to tell you about a dream I had."

"So that's your reason for awakening me in the middle of the night!" exclaimed Blaine irately. "Get back to your bed. You can tell me about your dream in the morning."

"But I can't wait until tomorrow," insisted Raymond as he leaned forward and thrust his pale face closer to Blaine's. "This dream," he said. "I have dreamt it often lately. It is hideous. Always the same. I am looking at a room, in the center of which I see a man and woman seated at a table. On the table stands a burning oil lamp. Frequently the man and woman look toward me, and whenever that happens the woman's eyes are filled with a soft and glorious light. She smiles at the man; he at her. Behind the man is a curtained window. The curtain moves slightly as if blown by a breeze. Evidently the window is open. It is upon this curtained window that I am compelled to focus my attention. I say 'compelled' because somehow I am horribly afraid of that window. I feel—I know—that something ghastly, something gruesome is about to happen and that the window is connected with the horror to come.

"While I stare at the wavering curtain, I am aware that the woman has left the room. My terror increases. Then something black and slender stealthily thrusts the curtain aside. It is a rifle. I want to shout a warning to the man at the table, but before I can do so the gun is fired.

"Slowly the man gets up from his chair. There is a surprized expression on his face, and he paws with blood-spattered hands at the wound the bullet has ripped in his neck. A second shot is fired, and this time the man sinks to the floor beneath the window. There he lies writhing in a spreading pool of blood.

"Now a man's head appears in the window. The murderer is making sure that his victim is dead. He is looking down, and I can't see his face. In fact, not once during the events that follow directly do I see his face. At this point the woman returns to the room. When

she sees the corpse, her face becomes a mask of heart-rending despair. The killer has not noticed her entrance and continues to look down upon the dead.

"Cautiously the woman moves toward the window. Fury and deathly hatred contort her beautiful face. She crouches as she steals forward, holding in her right hand a heavy glass bowl. At last only a few feet separate her from the murderer. She tenses herself, raises the bowl, at the same time taking a quick step forward to get within reach of the killer. But her foot loses its grip on the slippery floor and she falls across the dead man she was trying to avenge. She looks up toward the face of the killer, screams, and makes a vain attempt to get up from the bloody floor before the killer can lunge through the window. But before she can get to her feet, the killer has entered the room. He stands with his back toward me, staring down at the woman, who is kneeling on the floor, looking at him with a pitiful expression on her madonna-like face. Tears glisten on her cheeks as she pleads, making futile gestures toward him with her hands. The killer stretches his hands toward her white throat as if to choke her, is hesitant, and finally allows his hands to drop, while he stands irresolute. Then as the woman again begins to scream, a frenzy grips the killer. He reaches for a chair, swings it savagely down upon her head and shoulders, and stands back looking at her.

"Apparently the chair has not struck her squarely on the head, for slowly, with stiff, mechanical movements, the woman rises from the floor. One of her shoulders sags. Down the left side of her anguish-twisted face, blood is streaming. Her eyes stare fixedly into space as she fumbles about for something to support herself with. Once she stumbles and almost falls. While moving about unsteadily, trying to regain her balance, she strikes against the table. For a moment she steadies herself against it, all the while staring with distended, unseeing eyes into the flickering flame of the lamp upon the table. From her lips come guttural, moaning sounds.

"Once more the murderer strikes. Uttering a hoarse cry, he leaps forward and grasps the woman by the throat. I seem to hear him screaming, 'Die, damn you! Die!' The force of his attack drags the woman to the floor. As they fall, her arm is flung against the lamp, which topples and crashes on the floor. There is a flash of flames. Swirls of smoke eddy about the room, and while I am trying to see through the haze, I awaken."

Not once while speaking had Raymond taken his eyes off Blaine. And now, as silence cast its spell over the room, Blaine found it difficult to endure the youth's unwavering stare. He shuddered faintly as he seemed to sense that while Raymond was speaking the shadows from the distant corners of the room had crept nearer to his bed. Presently, unable to endure the stillness, he asked lamely: "Well, is that all?"

There was a catch in Raymond's voice when he answered. "The man and woman who were killed were my father and mother."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Blaine. "You were barely more than three years old when your parents died. At that age it would hardly be possible for you to form a concept of what they looked like which would serve you to identify them years later."

"But I know," persisted Raymond. "Listen. When I first experienced the dream, I could not identify the characters in it, although they seemed familiar to me. One day I happened to look at a

picture of my father and mother. The instant I saw it, I recognized my parents as the people in the dream. You do know my parents were murdered. That much the police did find out when they examined their charred bodies. And somebody—a somebody cruel enough to kill them but not a baby—carried me out of the burning house, away from danger. You yourself have told me that."

"Yes, you are right about that," assented Blaine.

He felt strangely weak. With his hands he wiped away the perspiration that had gathered on his forehead—a pale, blanched forehead whose only trace of color was a dark red birthmark the size of a quarter.

Blaine looked at his hands and silently cursed his weakness when he saw how his fingers trembled. He clenched his jaw, tried to say something, but failed to speak. Raymond's precise description of that crimson nightmare of long ago had ripped asunder time's veil of forgetfulness and upset his nerves. Blaine felt as he had that night when, upon returning to his home after the killing, he had washed his gory hands, and, while looking down into the basin where ripples of bloody water formed shifting patterns, he had glimpsed the blood-smeared, pain-racked face of Raymond's mother surrounded by leaping flames. He had screamed then, as for an insane moment his mind had wavered perilously on the brink of that horror-infested chasm in which dwells madness. Ever since he had been trying to forget. At times it was not difficult. During the day the affairs of a prosperous business held his attention. The life insurance for which he had killed Raymond's father had been the foundation of his fortune. The pleasures of power which his wealth gave him usually sufficed to overcome any feeling of regret concerning the means by which the power had been acquired. Even the fact that Raymond's father had been his own brother did not bother him. It was only when the image of Raymond's mother obtruded itself before his eyes that remorse touched him. There was that about killing a woman . . . too bad his gun had jammed . . . it was easier just to shoot . . . he had been forced to choke her . . . there had been blood on her neck and her flesh had seemed to squirm between his hands . . . at least he had spared Raymond. But what was Raymond staying for? He had told his dream. Odd fellow, Raymond. Just like his father. The emotional type. No head for business. But he was not sorry he had taken care of him. That was one of the things which had made it easier to forget.

BLAINE had carried his chain of thoughts to that point when he was interrupted as Raymond began to talk.

"I would have forgotten about the dream," said Raymond, "if it hadn't been for the fact that it kept on repeating itself. Night after night during the last month it has haunted me. Always I woke up possessed with a feeling of abysmal horror. Episodes of the dream persecuted me daily. I became nervous, and lost interest in my studies. Finally, just before returning here for vacation from college, I asked a professor of psychology what might be the cause of the dream. It was his opinion that the dream represents an actual experience, long ago forgotten, which has lain dormant in the recesses of my subconscious mind. Some chance thought or event has caused a reflex to function. As a result, the forgotten experience is asserting itself upon my conscious mind. This, he pointed out, would naturally occur during the period of sleep, as only at that time, or when the

conscious mind is in a hypnotic state, does the subconscious mind have a chance to assert itself. He told me of persons who, while under the influence of hypnotism, were able to recognize their kindergarten teacher, whom they had not seen since childhood, although previous to their being hypnotized they had failed to recognize the same person. The professor's reason for stating that the dream represents an actual experience was that it recurred. This, he pointed out, is true only of dreams representing actual incidents from the dreamer's life. Does that sound logical to you?"

"Yes, I don't doubt that such is the case," assented Blaine.

"I am glad you understand," said Raymond. He stood up, raised his right hand.

Blaine noticed the movement. The next moment his eyes bulged with fear, and a gasp of terror escaped him as he looked at the revolver in Raymond's hand. Hoarsely he muttered, "No. No. Don't. Don't shoot."

Raymond's hand did not falter. The revolver drew closer to Blaine, pointed directly at his heart. In the eyes behind the gun there was no sign of mercy; only hatred—and irrevocable doom.

Fear spurred Blaine's tongue. "Are you crazy?" he shouted. "What are you pointing that gun at me for?"

"You killed my father and mother!"

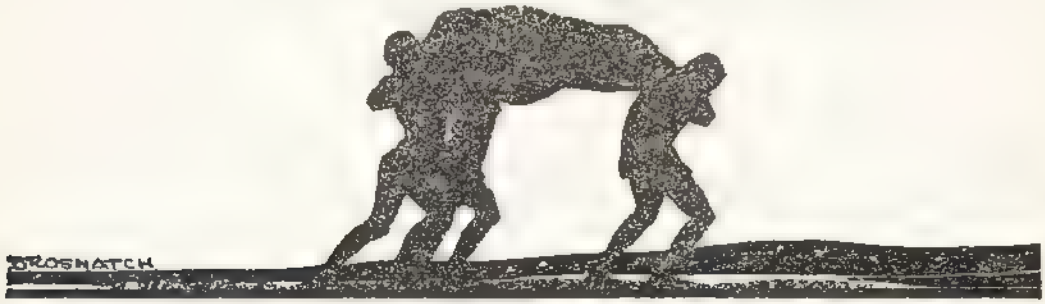
"I didn't. I swear it." Blaine's eyes narrowed. He felt certain he was confronted by a madman. There was no other way of explaining the situation. Raymond had no proof. His voice became coaxing.

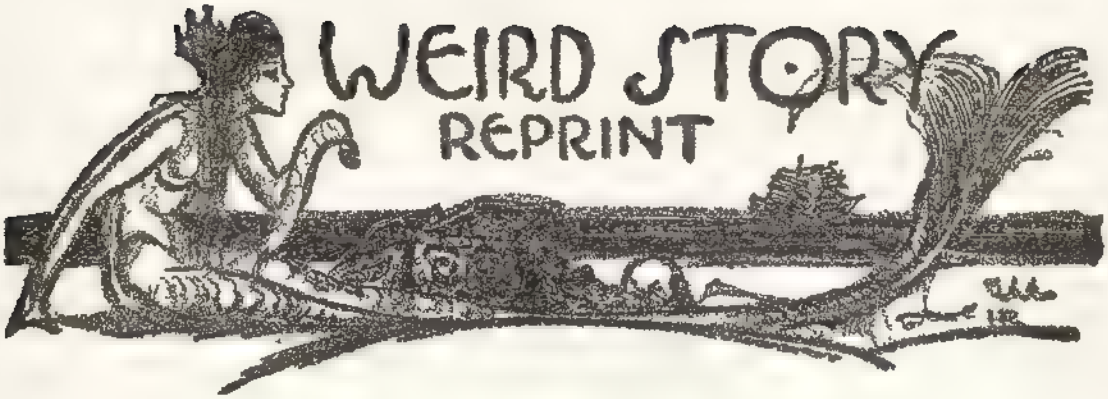
"Put the gun down, Raymond. I don't see why you should want to kill me. You can't prove I killed your father and mother. You didn't see the face of the killer in your dream. You said so yourself."

For a while Raymond said nothing. During the pause Blaine again wiped the perspiration from his forehead—that pale forehead with its ugly crimson stain.

Raymond eyed the mark, and a crafty look came into his burning eyes. He bent forward and hissed softly at Blaine:

"But I didn't tell you all about what happened tonight. Tonight the dream was different. You see, tonight I didn't wake up so soon—the dream lasted longer. I saw a face. A pale face. It hovered over me as I felt myself being carried out of a burning house. I shall never forget that face. Those haunted eyes! Such ghastly pallor! Ah, but the forehead was different. The whiteness of the forehead was marred by a dark red blotch. . . . Why are you so pale? . . . it will be over in a second . . . you should be glad I am not choking you to death. . . ."





The Temple*

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Manuscript found on the coast of Yucatan

ON AUGUST 20, 1917, I, Karl Heinrich, Graf von Altberg-Ehrenstein, Lieutenant-Commander in the Imperial German Navy and in charge of the submarine U-29, deposit this bottle and record in the Atlantic Ocean at a point to me unknown but probably about N. Latitude 20 degrees, W. Longitude 35 degrees, where my ship lies disabled on the ocean floor. I do so because of my desire to set certain unusual facts before the public; a thing I shall not in all probability survive to accomplish in person, since the circumstances surrounding me are as menacing as they are extraordinary, and involve not only the hopeless crippling of the U-29, but the impairment of my iron German will in a manner most disastrous.

On the afternoon of June 18, as reported by wireless to the U-61, bound for Kiel, we torpedoed the British freighter *Victory*, New York to Liverpool, in N. Latitude 45 degrees 16 minutes, W. Longitude 28 degrees 34 minutes; permitting the crew to leave in boats in order to obtain a good cinema view for the admiralty records. The ship sank quite picturesquely, bow first, the stern rising high out of the water whilst the hull shot down perpendicularly to the bottom of the sea. Our camera missed nothing, and I regret that so fine a reel of film should never reach Berlin. After that we sank the lifeboats with our guns and submerged.

When we rose to the surface about sunset a seaman's body was found on the deck, hands gripping the railing in curious fashion. The poor fellow was young, rather dark, and very handsome; probably an Italian or Greek, and undoubtedly of the *Victory's* crew. He had evidently sought refuge on the very ship which had been forced to destroy his own—one more victim of the unjust war of aggression which the English pig-dogs are waging upon the Fatherland. Our men searched him for souvenirs, and found in his coat pocket a very odd bit of ivory carved to represent a youth's head crowned with laurel. My fellow officer, Lieutenant Klenze, believed that the thing was of great age and artistic value, so took it from the men for himself.

* From WEIRD TALES for September 1925.

How it had ever come into the possession of a common sailor neither he nor I could imagine.

As the dead man was thrown overboard there occurred two incidents which created much disturbance amongst the crew. The fellow's eyes had been closed; but in the dragging of his body to the rail they were jarred open, and many seemed to entertain a queer delusion that they gazed steadily and mockingly at Schmidt and Zimmer, who were bent over the corpse. Then Boatswain Müller, an elderly man who would have known better had he not been a superstitious Alsatian swine, became so excited by this impression that he watched the body in the water, and swore that after it sank a little it drew its limbs into a swimming position and sped away to the south under the waves. Klenze and I did not like these displays of peasant ignorance, and severely reprimanded the men, particularly Müller.

The next day a very troublesome situation was created by the indisposition of some of the crew. They were evidently suffering from the nervous strain of our long voyage, and had had bad dreams. Several seemed quite dazed and stupid; and after satisfying myself that they were not feigning their weakness, I excused them from their duties. The sea was rather rough, so we descended to a depth where the waves were less troublesome. Here we were comparatively calm, despite a somewhat puzzling southward current which we could not identify from our oceanographic charts. The moans of the sick men were decidedly annoying; but since they did not appear to demoralize the rest of the crew, we did not resort to extreme measures. It was our plan to remain where we were and intercept the liner *Dacia,* mentioned in information from agents in New York.

In the early evening we rose to the surface, and found the sea less heavy. The smoke of a battleship was on the northern horizon, but our distance and ability to submerge made us safe. What worried us more was the talk of Boatswain Müller, which grew wilder as night came on. He was in a detestably childish state, and babbled of some illusion of dead bodies drifting past the undersea portholes; bodies which looked at him intently, and which he recognized in spite of bloating as having seen dying during some of our victorious German exploits. And he said that the young man we had found and tossed overboard was their leader. This was very gruesome and abnormal, so we confined Müller in irons and had him soundly whipped. The men were not pleased at his punishment, but discipline was necessary. We also denied the request of a delegation headed by Seaman Zimmer, that the curious carved ivory head be cast into the sea.

On June 20, Seamen Bohm and Schmidt, who had been ill the day before, became violently insane. I regretted that no physician was included in our complement of officers, since German lives are precious; but the constant ravings of the two concerning a terrible curse were most subversive of discipline, so drastic steps were taken. The crew accepted the event in a sullen fashion, but it seemed to quiet Müller, who thereafter gave us no trouble. In the evening we released him, and he went about his duties silently.

In the week that followed we were all very nervous, watching for the *Dacia.* The tension was aggravated by the disappearance of Müller and Zimmer, who undoubtedly committed suicide as a result of the fears which had seemed to harass them, though they were not observed in the act of jumping overboard. I was rather glad to be rid of Müller, for even his

silence had unfavorably affected the crew. Everyone seemed inclined to be silent now, as though holding a secret fear. Many were ill, but none made a disturbance. Lieutenant Klenze chafed under the strain, and was annoyed by the merest trifles—such as the school of dolphins which gathered about the U-29 in increasing numbers, and the growing intensity of that southward current which was not on our chart.

It at length became apparent that we had missed the *Dacia* altogether. Such failures are not uncommon, and we were more pleased than disappointed; since our return to Wilhelmshaven was now in order. At noon June 28 we turned northeastward, and despite some rather comical entanglements with the unusual masses of dolphins were soon under way.

The explosion in the engine room at two p. m. was wholly a surprize. No defect in the machinery or carelessness in the men had been noticed, yet without warning the ship was racked from end to end with a colossal shock. Lieutenant Klenze hurried to the engine room, finding the fuel-tank and most of the mechanism shattered, and Engineers Raabe and Schneider instantly killed. Our situation had suddenly become grave indeed; for though the chemical air regenerators were intact, and though we could use the devices for raising and submerging the ship and opening the hatches as long as compressed air and storage batteries might hold out, we were powerless to propel or guide the submarine. To seek rescue in the lifeboats would be to deliver ourselves into the hands of enemies unreasonably embittered against our great German nation, and our wireless had failed ever since the *Victory* affair to put us in touch with a fellow U-boat of the Imperial Navy.

From the hour of the accident till July 2 we drifted constantly to the south, almost without plans and encountering no vessel. Dolphins still encircled the U-29, a somewhat remarkable circumstance considering the distance we had covered. On the morning of July 2 we sighted a warship flying American colors, and the men became very restless in their desire to surrender. Finally Lieutenant Klenze had to shoot a seaman named Traube, who urged this un-German act with especial violence. This quieted the crew for the time, and we submerged unseen.

The next afternoon a dense flock of sea-birds appeared from the south, and the ocean began to heave ominously. Closing our hatches, we awaited developments until we realized that we must either submerge or be swamped in the mounting waves. Our air pressure and electricity were diminishing, and we wished to avoid all unnecessary use of our slender mechanical resources; but in this case there was no choice. We did not descend far, and when after several hours the sea was calmer, we decided to return to the surface. Here, however, a new trouble developed; for the ship failed to respond to our direction in spite of all that the mechanics could do. As the men grew more frightened at this undersea imprisonment, some of them began to mutter again about Lieutenant Klenze's ivory image, but the sight of an automatic pistol calmed them. We kept the poor devils as busy as we could, tinkering at the machinery even when we knew it was useless.

KLENZE and I usually slept at different times; and it was during my sleep, about five a. m., July 4, that the general mutiny broke loose. The six remaining pigs of seamen, suspecting that we were lost, had suddenly burst into a mad fury at our refusal to surrender to the Yankee battleship two days before, and were in a delirium of cursing and destruction. They

roared like the animals they were, and broke instruments and furniture indiscriminately, screaming about such nonsense as the curse of the ivory image and the dark dead youth who looked at them and swam away. Lieutenant Klenze seemed paralyzed and inefficient, as one might expect of a soft, womanish Rhinelander. I shot all six men, for it was necessary, and made sure that none remained alive.

We expelled the bodies through the double hatches and were alone in the U-29. Klenze seemed very nervous, and drank heavily. It was decided that we remain alive as long as possible, using the large stock of provisions and chemical supply of oxygen, none of which had suffered from the crazy antics of those swinehound seamen. Our compasses, depth gages, and other delicate instruments were ruined; so that henceforth our only reckoning would be guesswork, based on our watches, the calendar, and our apparent drift as judged by any objects we might spy through the portholes or from the conning-tower. Fortunately we had storage batteries still capable of long use, both for interior lighting and for the searchlight. We often cast a beam around the ship, but saw only dolphins, swimming parallel to our own drifting course. I was scientifically interested in those dolphins; for though the ordinary *Delphinus delphis* is a cetacean mammal, unable to subsist without air, I watched one of the swimmers closely for two hours, and did not see him alter his submerged condition.

With the passage of time Klenze and I decided that we were still drifting south, meanwhile sinking deeper and deeper. We noted the marine fauna and flora, and read much on the subject in the books I had carried with me for spare moments. I could not help observing, however, the inferior scientific knowledge of my companion. His mind was not Prussian, but given to imaginings and speculations which have no value. The fact of our coming death affected him curiously, and he would frequently pray in remorse over the men, women, and children we had sent to the bottom; forgetting that all things are noble which serve the German state. After a time he became noticeably unbalanced, gazing for hours at his ivory image and weaving fanciful stories of the lost and forgotten things under the sea. Sometimes, as a psychological experiment, I would lead him on in these wanderings, and listen to his endless poetical quotations and tales of sunken ships. I was very sorry for him, for I dislike to see a German suffer; but he was not a good man to die with. For myself I was proud, knowing how the Fatherland would revere my memory and how my sons would be taught to be men like me.

On August 9, we espied the ocean floor, and sent a powerful beam from the searchlight over it. It was a vast undulating plain, mostly covered with seaweed, and strown with the shells of small mollusks. Here and there were slimy objects of puzzling contour, draped with weeds and encrusted with barnacles, which Klenze declared must be ancient ships lying in their graves. He was puzzled by one thing, a peak of solid matter, protruding above the ocean bed nearly four feet at its apex; about two feet thick, with flat sides and smooth upper surfaces which met at a very obtuse angle. I called the peak a bit of outcropping rock, but Klenze thought he saw carvings on it. After a while he began to shudder, and turned away from the scene as if frightened; yet could give no explanation save that he was overcome with the vastness, darkness, remoteness, antiquity, and mystery of the oceanic abysses. His mind was tired, but I am

always a German, and was quick to notice two things: that the U-29 was standing the deep-sea pressure splendidly, and that the peculiar dolphins were still about us, even at a depth where the existence of high organisms is considered impossible by most naturalists. That I had previously over-estimated our depth, I was sure; but none the less we must still be deep enough to make these phenomena remarkable. Our southward speed, as gaged by the ocean floor, was about as I had estimated from the organisms passed at higher levels.

It was at three-fifteen p. m., August 12, that poor Klenze went wholly mad. He had been in the conning-tower using the searchlight when I saw him bound into the library compartment where I sat reading, and his face at once betrayed him. I will repeat here what he said, underlining the words he emphasized: "*He* is calling! *He* is calling! I hear him! We must go!" As he spoke he took his ivory image from the table, pocketed it, and seized my arm in an effort to drag me up the companionway to the deck. In a moment I understood that he meant to open the hatch and plunge with me into the water outside, a vagary of suicidal and homicidal mania for which I was scarcely prepared. As I hung back and attempted to soothe him he grew more violent, saying: "Come now—do not wait until later; it is better to repent and be forgiven than to defy and be condemned." Then I tried the opposite of the soothing plan, and told him he was mad—pitifully demented. But he was unmoved, and cried: "If I am mad, it is mercy! May the gods pity the man who in his callousness can remain sane to the hideous end! Come and be mad whilst *he* still calls with mercy!"

This outburst seemed to relieve a pressure in his brain; for as he finished he grew much milder, asking me to let him depart alone if I would not accompany him. My course at once became clear. He was a German, but only a Rhinelander, and he was now a potentially dangerous madman. By complying with his suicidal request I could immediately free myself from one who was no longer a companion but a menace. I asked him to give me the ivory image before he went, but this request brought from him such uncanny laughter that I did not repeat it. Then I asked him if he wished to leave any keepsake or lock of hair for his family in Germany in case I should be rescued, but again he gave me that strange laugh. So as he climbed the ladder I went to the levers and allowing proper time-intervals operated the machinery which sent him to his death. After I saw that he was no longer in the boat I threw the searchlight around the water in an effort to obtain a last glimpse of him; since I wished to ascertain whether the water-pressure would flatten him as it theoretically should, or whether the body would be unaffected, like those extraordinary dolphins. I did not, however, succeed in finding my late companion, for the dolphins were massed thickly and obscurely about the conning-tower.

That evening I regretted that I had not taken the ivory image surreptitiously from poor Klenze's pocket as he left, for the memory of it fascinated me. I could not forget the youthful, beautiful head with its leafy crown, though I am not by nature an artist. I was also sorry that I had no one with whom to converse. Klenze, though not my mental equal, was much better than no one. I did not sleep well that night, and wondered exactly when the end would come. Surely, I had little enough chance of rescue.

The next day I ascended to the conning-tower and commenced the customary searchlight explorations. Northward

the view was much the same as it had been all the four days since we had sighted the bottom, but I perceived that the drifting of the U-29 was less rapid. As I swung the beam around to the south, I noticed that the ocean floor ahead fell away in a marked declivity, and bore curiously regular blocks of stone in certain places, disposed as if in accordance with definite patterns. The boat did not at once descend to match the greater ocean depth, so I was soon forced to adjust the searchlight to cast a sharply downward beam. Owing to the abruptness of the change a wire was disconnected, which necessitated a delay of many minutes for repairs; but at length the light streamed on again, flooding the marine valley below me.

I am not given to emotion of any kind, but my amazement was very great when I saw what lay revealed in that electrical glow. And yet as one reared in the best *kultur* of Prussia I should not have been amazed, for geology and tradition alike tell us of great transpositions in oceanic and continental areas. What I saw was an extended and elaborate array of ruined edifices; all of magnificent though unclassified architecture, and in various stages of preservation. Most appeared to be of marble, gleaming whitely in the rays of the searchlight, and the general plan was of a large city at the bottom of a narrow valley, with numerous isolated temples and villas on the steep slopes above. Roofs were fallen and columns were broken, but there still remained an air of immemorially ancient splendor which nothing could efface.

CONFRONTED at last with the Atlantis I had formerly deemed largely a myth, I was the most eager of explorers. At the bottom of that valley a river once had flowed; for as I examined the scene more closely I beheld the remains of stone and marble bridges and sea-walls, and terraces and embankments once verdant and beautiful. In my enthusiasm I became nearly as idiotic and sentimental as poor Klenze, and was very tardy in noticing that the southward current had ceased at last, allowing the U-29 to settle slowly down upon the sunken city as an airplane settled upon a town of the upper earth. I was slow, too, in realizing that the school of unusual dolphins had vanished.

In about two hours the boat rested in a paved plaza close to the rocky wall of the valley. On one side I could view the entire city as it sloped from the plaza down to the old river bank; on the other side, in startling proximity, I was confronted by the richly ornate and perfectly preserved façade of a great building, evidently a temple, hollowed from the solid rock. Of the original workmanship of this titanic thing I can only make conjectures. The façade, of immense magnitude, apparently covers a continuous hollow recess; for its windows are many and widely distributed. In the center yawns a great open door, reached by an impressive flight of steps, and surrounded by exquisite carvings like the figures of bacchanals in relief. Foremost of all are the great columns and frieze, both decorated with sculptures of inexpressible beauty; obviously portraying idealized pastoral scenes and processions of priests and priestesses bearing strange ceremonial devices in adoration of a radiant god. The art is of the most phenomenal perfection, largely Hellenic in idea, yet strangely individual. It imparts an impression of terrible antiquity, as though it were the remotest rather than the immediate ancestor of Greek art. Nor can I doubt that every detail of this massive product was fashioned from the virgin hillside rock of our planet. It is palpably a part of the

(Please turn to page 246)

COMING NEXT MONTH

TWO people had taken Marxman's drug and died the little death: the dock laborer on whom Marxman had experimented, and Doctor Satan. Now, with Ascott Keane's taking of the purplish crystals, there were three.

Keane's first sensation after swallowing the stuff was—pain.

His body ached as though every bone in it had been broken. He felt as though each nerve were being slowly rasped with red-hot files.

It hurts to die, was his last conscious thought. And after that he seemed to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep that might have lasted a moment or two, or a thousand years, so that his next thought was: the gateway of death is no black river, or cavern mouth guarded by the many-headed watch-dog; it is sleep.

But that was a dim thought, quickly lost in a fog of blind horror as his senses slowly struggled back to him. What was it that horrified him? For a long time he did not know, could not define it. . . .

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By Paul Ernst

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By RONAL KAYSER

A grim, weird story of torture on the Wheel of Death, and strange albino mice and snakes in the torture cells of a castle under the iron rule of a Dictator.

IN THE WORLD'S DUSK

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A gripping tale of the last survivor of the human race and his attempts to repopulate the world.

THE CRYSTAL CURSE

By EANDO BINDER

A veritable weird rhapsody in blue is this fascinating story of dual personality and a man who bridged the gulfs between the dimensions of space.

THE BLACK ABBOT OF PUTHUUM

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A tale of ghastly horror in a weird monastery of the desert.

March Weird Tales . . . . . Out March 1

The Temple

(Continued from page 244)

valley wall, though how the vast interior was ever excavated I can not imagine. Perhaps a cavern or series of caverns furnished the nucleus. Neither age nor submersion has corroded the pristine grandeur of this awful fane—for fane indeed it must be—and today after thousands of years it rests untarnished and inviolate in the endless night and silence of an ocean chasm.

I can not reckon the number of hours I spent in gazing at the sunken city with its buildings, arches, statues, and bridges, and the colossal temple with its beauty and mystery. Though I knew that death was near, my curiosity was consuming, and I threw the searchlight's beam about in eager quest. The shaft of light permitted me to learn many details, but refused to show anything within the gaping door of the rock-hewn temple; and after a time I turned off the current, conscious of the need of conserving power. The rays were now perceptibly dimmer than they had been during the weeks of drifting. And as if sharpened by the coming of deprivation of light, my desire to explore the watery secrets grew. I, a German, should be the first to tread those eon-forgotten ways!

I produced and examined a deep-sea diving-suit of jointed metal, and experimented with the portable light and air regenerator. Though I should have trouble in managing the double hatches alone, I believed I could overcome all obstacles with my scientific skill and actually walk about the dead city in person.

On August 16 I effected an exit from the U-29, and laboriously made my way through the ruined and mud-choked streets to the ancient river. I found no skeletons or other human remains, but gleaned a wealth of archeological lore from sculptures and coins. Of this I can not now speak save to utter my awe at a culture in the full noon of glory when cave-dwellers roamed Europe and the Nile flowed unwatched to the sea. Others, guided by this manuscript if it shall ever be found, must unfold the mysteries at which I can only hint. I returned to the boat as my electric batteries grew feeble, resolved to explore the rock temple on the following day.

On the 17th, as my impulse to search out the mystery of the temple waxed still more insistent, a great disappointment befell me; for I found that the materials needed to replenish the portable light had perished in the mutiny of those pigs in July. My rage was unbounded, yet my German sense forbade me to venture unprepared into an utterly black interior which might prove the lair of some indescribable marine monster or a labyrinth of passages from whose windings I could never extricate myself. All I could do was to turn on the waning searchlight of the U-29, and with its aid walk up the temple steps and study the exterior carvings. The shaft of light entered the door at an upward angle, and I peered in to see if I could glimpse anything, but all in vain. Not even the roof was visible; and though I took a step or two inside after testing the floor with a staff, I dared not go farther. Moreover, for the first time in my life I experienced the emotion of dread. I began to realize how some of poor Klenze's moods had arisen, for as the temple drew me more and more, I feared its aqueous abysses with a blind and mounting terror. Returning to the submarine, I turned off the lights and sat thinking in the dark. Electricity must now be saved for emergencies.

SATURDAY the 18th I spent in total darkness, tormented by thoughts and memories that threatened to overcome my

German will. Klenze had gone mad and perished before reaching this sinister remnant of a past unwholesomely remote, and had advised me to go with him. Was, indeed, Fate preserving my reason only to draw me irresistibly to an end more horrible and unthinkable than any man has dreamed of? Clearly, my nerves were sorely taxed, and I must cast off these impressions of weaker men.

I could not sleep Saturday night, and turned on the lights regardless of the future. It was annoying that the electricity should not last out the air and provisions. I revived my thoughts of euthanasia, and examined my automatic pistol. Toward morning I must have dropped asleep with the lights on, for I awoke in darkness yesterday afternoon to find the batteries dead. I struck several matches in succession, and desperately regretted the improvidence which had caused us long ago to use up the few candles we carried.

After the fading of the last match I dared to waste, I sat very quietly without a light. As I considered the inevitable end my mind ran over preceding events, and developed a hitherto dormant impression which would have caused a weaker and more superstitious man to shudder. *The head of the radiant god in the sculptures on the rock temple is the same as that carven bit of ivory which the dead sailor brought from the sea and which poor Klenze carried back into the sea.*

I was a little dazed by this coincidence, but did not become terrified. It is only the inferior thinker who hastens to explain the singular and the complex by the primitive short cut of supernaturalism. The coincidence was strange, but I was too sound a reasoner to connect circumstances which admit of no logical connection, or to associate in any uncanny fashion the disastrous events which had led from the *Victory* affair to my present

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plight. Feeling the need of more rest, I took a sedative and secured some more sleep. My nervous condition was reflected in my dreams, for I seemed to hear the cries of drowning persons, and to see dead faces pressing against the portholes of the boat. And among the dead faces was the living, mocking face of the youth with the ivory image.

I MUST be careful how I record my awakening today, for I am unstrung, and much hallucination is necessarily mixed with fact. Psychologically my case is most interesting, and I regret that it can not be observed scientifically by a competent German authority. Upon opening my eyes my first sensation was an overmastering desire to visit the rock temple; a desire which grew every instant, yet which I automatically sought to resist through some emotion of fear which operated in the reverse direction. Next there came to me the impression of *light* amidst the darkness of dead batteries, and I seemed to see a sort of phosphorescent glow in the water through the porthole which opened toward the temple. This aroused my curiosity, for I knew of no deep-sea organism capable of emitting such luminosity. But before I could investigate there came a third impression which because of its irrationality caused me to doubt the objectivity of anything my senses might record. It was an aural delusion, a sensation of rhythmic, melodic sound as of some wild yet beautiful chant or choral hymn, coming from the outside through the absolutely soundproof hull of the U-29.

CONVINCED of my psychological and nervous abnormality, I lighted some matches and poured a stiff dose of sodium bromide solution, which seemed to calm me to the extent of dispelling the illusion of sound. But the phosphorescence remained, and I had difficulty in repressing a childish impulse to go to the porthole and seek its source. It was horribly realistic, and I could soon distinguish by its aid the familiar objects around me, as well as the empty sodium bromide glass of which I had had no former visual impression in its present location. This last circumstance made me ponder, and I crossed the room and touched the glass. It was indeed in the place where I had seemed to see it. Now I knew that the light was either real or part of an hallucination so fixed and consistent that I could not hope to dispel it; so abandoning all resistance I ascended to the conning-tower to look for the luminous agency. Might it not actually be another U-boat, offering possibilities of rescue?

It is well that the reader accept nothing which follows as objective truth; for since the events transcend natural law, they are necessarily the subjective and unreal creations of my overtaxed mind. When I attained the conning-tower I found the sea in general far less luminous than I had expected. There was no animal or vegetable phosphorescence about, and the city that sloped down to the river was invisible in blackness. What I did see was not spectacular, not grotesque or terrifying, yet it removed my last vestige of trust in my consciousness. *For the door and windows of the undersea temple hewn from the rocky hill were vividly aglow with a flickering radiance, as from a mighty altar-flame far within.*

Later incidents are chaotic. As I stared at the uncannily lighted door and windows, I became subject to the most extravagant visions—visions so extravagant that I can not even relate them. I fancied that I discerned objects in the temple; objects both stationary and moving; and seemed to hear again the unreal chant that had floated to me when first I awaked. And over all rose thoughts and

fears which centered in the youth from the sea and the ivory image whose carving was duplicated on the frieze and columns of the temple before me. I thought of poor Klenze, and wondered where his body rested with the image he had carried back into the sea. He had warned me of something, and I had not heeded —but he was a soft-headed Rhinelander who went mad at troubles which a Prussian could bear with ease.

THE rest is very simple. My impulse to visit and enter the temple has now become an inexplicable and imperious command which ultimately can not be denied. My own German will no longer controls my acts, and volition is henceforward possible only in minor matters. Such madness it was which drove Klenze to his death, bareheaded and unprotected in the ocean; but I am a Prussian and a man of sense, and will use to the last what little will I have. When first I saw that I must go, I prepared my diving-suit, helmet, and air regenerator for instant donning, and immediately commenced to write this hurried chronicle in the hope that it may some day reach the world. I shall seal the manuscript in a bottle and entrust it to the sea as I leave the U-29 for ever.

I have no fear, not even from the prophecies of the madman Klenze. What I have seen I can not be sure, and I know that this madness of my own will at most lead only to suffocation when my air is gone. The light in the temple is a sheer delusion, and I shall die calmly, like a German, in the black and forgotten depths. This demoniac laughter which I hear as I write comes only from my own weakening brain. So I will carefully don my diving-suit and walk boldly up the steps into that primal shrine, that silent secret of unfathomed waters and uncounted years.

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THIS department is a clearing-house wherein you, the readers of WEIRD TALES, can exchange ideas and express your opinions about the stories in this magazine; what you like or dislike, and why; what you wish to see in the magazine; and other comments pertinent to such a magazine as this. We have not enough space to print all the letters we receive, but we try to give an accurate cross-section of reader opinion in the space at our disposal. We want you to feel that the Eyrie belongs to you, and that you have the right to air your views, whether they be derogatory or otherwise.

An Anagrammatic Alias

H. P. Lovecraft writes from his home in Providence, Rhode Island: "*The Way Home* is one of the most atmospherically satisfying things I have seen lately, and I was interested to note that the author is Paul Ernst under an anagrammatic alias. I live in hope that the purely weird element may regain its ascendancy, as tales like that would imply. . . . Other good yarns in recent issues of WT are *The Cold Gray God, The Mystery of the Last Guest, Shadows in Zamboula, The Hand of Wrath, and The Chain of Aforgomon.*"

"Shadows in Zamboula" Rates High

Alvin V. Pershing, of Bowling Green, Kentucky, writes: "I desire to read a Smith story in each issue. Howard's *Shadows in Zamboula* is one of the very finest tales of horror and weirdness that I have ever been privileged to read. I am glad to see that Paul Ernst has not written a new Doctor Satan story in the December issue, but his story of *Dancing Feet* was fine. (I did not like his Doctor Satan stories.) The finish of *The Carnival of Death* was of a high order. It certainly deserves great praise as one of the best serials published by you. It was almost as good as *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*. . . . I like the recent semi-nude covers. Whoever is the artist who draws the sketches for Howard's two last stories is good. His portrayal of Conan satisfies my fanciful image of him, even his face. Who is he?" [The artist is James Napoli.—THE EDITOR.]

Magnetic Stories

Edythe M. Baird, of Latuda, Utah, writes: "I have only been reading WT since last January. But although I have always had a horror of the occult and such-like things, WT draws me every month. Its stories are magnetic. I have just finished the December issue. *The Hour of the Dragon* promises plenty of thrills. *The Man with the Blue Beard* takes my next vote, and then *Dancing Feet* and *The Great Brain of Kaldar.* I didn't care much for *The Chain of Aforgomon.* I missed Doctor Satan this month. Those are a series of stories well worth mentioning. Give us more Jules de Grandin, and may I say 'Long Live WEIRD TALES.'"

A Reader for Eight Years

Frederick B. Shroyer, of Ann Arbor, Michigan, writes: "I usually drop a line to your office about once every three or four years. I believe that it is about time, therefore, for this periodical duty and pleasure. I have read your magazine for the last eight years and have felt a personal pride in its steady rise from a pulp thriller to a magazine of truly literary merits. Congratulations! You have by no means reached perfection. Far from it! But I believe that if you continue to live up to the old policy of publishing a magazine that is really and entirely weird, you will eventually be the proud publishers of a magazine that will be comparable to the best. I feel that recently you have been drift-

ing, in some respects, from the above-mentioned policy. You have been inclined to publish too many commonplace mystery stories, stories that lead up to a natural and decidedly prosaic conclusion. This, in my opinion, lends a cheapening note to an otherwise entertaining and unique magazine. You see, Mr. Editor, we can find common mystery stories in scores of magazines on any news stand, but WEIRD TALES is our only source of decidedly literary weird tales, tales of the supernatural and of pure fantasy. Please help us to keep faith in the confidence that you have inspired in us during the last eight or ten years. Don't let us down and I assure you that we, the readers, will stick by you!"

Enjoyable Verse

Emerson Soukup writes from San Quentin, California: "WT contains more original stories than any other magazine I have read. Aside from Robert Howard, my favorite, A. W. Bernal wrote the most interesting and enjoyable story so far this year—*The Man Who Was Two Men. Lord of the Lamia,* by Kline, slithered along to a smashing denouement. . . . I greatly enjoy the verse you publish. It is striking and quaint. I marvel at the lack of comment on it. Your best poet is Robert Nelson. He embodies the spirit of WT. Cristel Hastings certainly knows how to draw the eery chill from the remote recesses of a jaded reader's mind."

The Recent Reprints

Robert W. Lowndes, of Darien, Connecticut, writes: "Honor and festivals are due whatever gods were responsible for sending artist Virgil Finlay to you. After the hideous array of pen-scratchers, Napoli was a relief, but Virgil is a positive delight. He is truly unique, that one; reminiscent of the classic illustrations in high-priced editions of Greek and Roman masterpieces. If only you could have T. Wyatt Nelson return, and give Hugh Rankin one illustration every issue, then, with Virgil as foremost, WEIRD TALES would be the highest quality in illustrations as well as story content. Orchids to Mrs. Brundage for her run of splendid covers. The return of the long-absent nudes brought gladness to this unworthy critic as I gazed at the September and November issues. September takes first place, with December, February, and October running close for second place. Plums to the editor for a generally fine se-

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lection of content for the past year, and special honors for a 12-point reprint out-turning: *Arthur Jermyn* and *In Amundsen's Tent* seem to vie for first place, while *The Canal, The Monster-God of Mamurth,* and *Lukundoo* are close behind. Special mention to the three excellent reprints taken outside the pale of WEIRD TALES' files. (I don't recall whether *The Supreme Witch* was from an early issue or not; at any rate, I ranked it equal if not better than the rest in the January number.)"

Comment on the Illustrators

Paul Freehafer, of Boise, Idaho, writes: "I was very much pleased with the illustrations by Virgil Finlay. Hang on to him and to Napoli—they are your best illustrators. Also get Rankin to do some more illustrating for you. His drawings are *weird*—and after all, that's the thing that counts. Clark Ashton Smith's *The Chain of Aforgomon* shared honors with the reprint as best story of the December issue in my opinion. The short short stories were fine, as usual, and Hamilton's story was fairly good—I like science-fiction, and far be it from me to discourage its appearance in WEIRD TALES. Conan is superb. Why have we not had any more stories from the pen of Doctor Keller? Unless I am greatly mistaken his last story in WEIRD TALES was *The Solitary Hunters,* published two years ago. Any stories from Doctor Keller are more than welcome. Please publish an occasional story of pure fantasy, such as those penned so exquisitely by Lord Dunsany. Though pure fantasy palls as a steady diet, an occasional tidbit adds zest to the menu served by 'our' magazine. Also, 'horror' stories are welcome, if you can avoid the blood-and-thunder type used by a number of current magazines. As long as WEIRD TALES stays weird I'll continue to be a reader."

Lukundoo

Henry Kuttner, of Beverly Hills, California, writes: "Best story in the December issue: the reprint, White's *Lukundoo.* Reprinted in several anthologies, as well as in a collection of White's own yarns, this story will undoubtedly go down in the history of weird literature. Dorothy L. Sayers lists it under 'Tales of Nightmares and the Borderland of the Mind,' observing that to some people the story is 'terrible beyond all imagination.' Another of White's worth reprinting is far more horrible to my mind: a tale of burglars who enter a house and are confronted by the tenant, a bestial monster both canine and anthropoid. The title slips my mind at the moment. *The Chain of Aforgomon,* too, is worth mention. And Paul Ernst, as ever, writes an entertaining story. Incidentally, for those who kick about the 'sameness' and gore of Howard's yarns, I have always found that his stories, whether of Conan, King Kull, or Solomon Kane, were engrossing, and that to me is the test of a good story. Howard's *Valley of the Worm,* combining weirdness with excellent style of narrative, seems to me his best. Glad to see so many illustrations. You'll discover a Goya yet! A certain story from the early files of WEIRD TALES has been haunting me, called, I believe, *The Church Stove at Raebrudafisk.* It was a tale about a blind man's vengeance, and a terrible death by fire; and it doesn't deserve the oblivion that has engulfed it. And the same goes for Hamilton's *The Metal Monsters.*"

Virgil Finlay's Art

Robert Leonard Russell, of Mount Vernon, Illinois, writes: "The December issue is without a doubt the most different of any in a long time. The tales were all interesting and the illustrations were 'way above par. As for the best story of the month, I could not decide between Ernst's *Dancing Feet* and Smith's *The Chain of Aforgomon.* Both of these were swell and both were quite different from the usual WT yarn. No better, but just different. I especially enjoyed Tooke's *The Hedge* and Johnson's *Lead Soldiers.* The latter was very interesting, being highly timely and very well written. Virgil Finlay, your new black and white illustrator, is one of the best you have ever had. His drawing for *The Chain of Aforgomon* was his finest in the December issue. He shows real imagination and talent in his work." [You should see the excellent illustrations—twenty-five of them—that Mr. Finlay has drawn for the Wright's Shakespeare Library edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*—THE EDITOR.]

Our Women Readers

Daisy M. Adams, of Hartsdale, New York, writes: "I was surprized at the number of women who read WEIRD TALES—I have been a reader of it since 1928—and had an amusing experience when I went for my current

copy. As I left the rack where they are on display, an elderly matron came toward me and seeing the cover of the magazine, she said, "Young woman, if that is the last copy, will you please let me have it, for I come from Armonk just to get it?" (Armonk is about six miles from White Plains where I purchased it.) I told her she would not be disappointed, for there were still two copies. While talking to her, the other copy was purchased by a woman who was waiting for the Boston bus, so I made it my business to ask her if she enjoyed reading the magazine and she said it was her favorite, though she never read it when alone or at night."

More Stories About Reincarnation

John J. Rosecrans, of Sioux City, Iowa, writes: "A few words for the Eyrie, from a regular subscriber. I was glad to have Conan back again. If *The Hour of the Dragon* ends as good as it began I shall vote Mr. Howard your ace writer. And I have no doubt but that others will agree with me. Glad you left out Doctor Satan. We readers can struggle along very nicely without him. A super-crook against a super-detective has no place in a magazine devoted to weird tales. I notice that several readers ask for more tales of sorcery, magic, witchcraft. I add, reincarnation. It has been a long time since WEIRD TALES has given us a good story of dual personality."

Detective Yarns in WT

Joseph Robins, of Elizabeth, New Jersey, writes: "The drawings of Virgil Finlay in your December issue are the finest I have ever seen in your magazine. They are beautiful. Please have this artist illustrate your magazine throughout. As to the stories, when will WEIRD TALES stop publishing such putrid yarns as *The Blue Woman* and *The Man with the Blue Beard,* both of which are reminiscent of that much censured story, *The Death Cry?* These three stories—and there have been others—are built on a hoax. Usually they start out well, develop an eery and supernatural atmosphere, make the reader feel he is reading a *weird* tale, and then, toward the closing chapters, the reader finds that he has been reading a detective story in disguise! Harold Ward has written some fine stories. How could he turn out such a cheap and sensational story as *The Man with the Blue Beard?* And how much longer will

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FOR A LOVELY, CHUMMY PAL, write Nancy Bell, Box 773, Philadelphia, Pa. (Stamp, please.)

WEIRD TALES continue to ignore the protests against detective stories? Doctor Satan and Jules de Grandin are great; put all other detectives in the waste-basket. To those readers who defend your nude women covers I say this: Art is fine in its place. Nude women on the cover of a pulp-paper fiction magazine convey but one impression to the casual observer; that it is a magazine of sexy stories—he likens it to the many sexy magazines now in circulation. That is invariably the reaction of all who see such magazine covers. So why misrepresent WEIRD TALES in the world of magazines? Because of the fine poetry and merits of the magazine, especially the fact that stories in it have been included in annual best fiction anthologies, I have often been tempted to discuss items in it with school instructors, but the nature of the covers has held me back. Why cannot the covers be of the same high quality as the reading-matter?"

The December Issue

Louise Leftwich, of Inglewood, California, writes: "The December magazine draws this from my unwilling hand, for I don't like to write to magazines. You had one of my favorite stories as a reprint—*Lukundoo*. Its impact is lessened because I have read it so many times before, but there's a story for you! And last month I groaned over Poe's *William Wilson* because I have read it so many times and *don't* like it. *The Hour of the Dragon* promises well—while *The Carnival of Death* rather fizzled out—so many serials seem to; they start off with a brave show of mystery—then I suppose the author's inspiration fails. . . . *Dancing Feet* is all right; so is *The Hedge*, and I always like Hamilton."

The Chain of Aforgomon

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "Congratulations on the December WEIRD TALES. It certainly made a big hit with me. *The Chain of Aforgomon* by Clark Ashton Smith was as pleasing and well-written a bit of fantasy as it has been my good fortune to read in many a month. Let me add my plea to those other readers who have been asking for more stories dealing with purely fantastic themes. Such tales transport the reader with the speed of light into deathless realms of wonder or carry him across immeasurable leagues of time and space into the nighted abyss beyond the stars. The prosaic, work-a-day world about us is forgotten in the contemplation of new vistas of enchantment. You labeled Smith's tale 'a striking and unforgettable' story and it surely was, but Paul Ernst's *Dancing Feet* also belongs in the same class. That was as perfect a piece of work as Ernst has ever done. No need of telling you it was superior to his Doctor Satan stories; you know it was. Hamilton's interplanetary tale was nicely told, and it was a pleasure to re-read *Lukundoo*. It is like meeting up with an old friend to find one of those good 'old-timers' in the back of the book each month. Howard's new serial got off to a good start, but I greatly doubt if he will ever again attain quite the peak of perfection that he achieved in *The Valley of the Worm*. To date, that stands out as his greatest. And I do not intend that statement as a slam for Howard's later stories. I'm for him 100 per-cent. I heaved a sigh of relief when I came to the end of *The Carnival of Death*, and Harold Ward was disappointing. Stick to weird fiction, and let the detectives go to blazes and elsewhere. Don't you think the time is ripe for another one of those space-horror stories? As you know, it has been some time since we've had one. Am still waiting for reprints of *The Girl from Samarcand*, *The Space-Eaters*, and *Bimini*."

Less Blood and Fighting

Le Wells Rust, of Fort Collins, Colorado, writes: "I can't resist your plea for readers' criticisms in the December Eyrie. This is my first letter in the ten years or more I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES. In that time I have attempted to stop reading your magazine many times, but have found that I cannot do it and always come back for more because of the fascination of the out-of-the-ordinary stories. I consider myself a typical reader, so am giving all the opinions I have. First, authors, and my favorites are Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Seabury Quinn and C. L. Moore. I would be deeply disappointed if the writings of several of these were not in each issue. Give us more stories of the supernatural and less stories of blood and fighting. Mere gore is not weird; werewolves, vampires, and banshees are weird, and my favorite tales are of these. Give us more stories on the order of the greatest serial you have published, *The Vampire Master*. I heartily dislike stories like *The Man with the Blue Beard* in the Decem-

ber issue. This was far below the type of fare usually given us readers. I dislike particularly any story in which the reader is tricked and misled by being given supernatural explanations which are later disregarded in favor of logical ones. Such endings are a tremendous anti-climax and leave a bad taste and feeling of disgust. Of course readers do not believe in vampires and werewolves, but they do make interesting reading. Please, no more trickery and laughing at the reader."

A Loyal Fan Comments

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "Guess it's high time for me to be a-sendin' my two-cents worth o' comment. *The Hour of the Dragon* has a gripping start—with an eye-flashing interest—Conan is just too grand—a reg'lar he-man. The author doesn't make him too invincible, which adds to the flavor of Conan's adventures—and best of all—he cusses. A type, as Conan is, would be sissified if he didn't cuss. . . . I've the biggest bookay for Clark Ashton Smith this time. His tales are always top-notch, but he always manages to work in the gruesome, so that even I shudder and get crawly spiders up and down my spine. However, this *Chain of Aforgomon* embraces peoples and lands that are so very unknown, and brings forth my favorite topic of reincarnation. The story is something worth telling about—it runs true to the Smith type and yet offers something a bit different, for which I have nothing but praise. *The Great Brain of Kaldar* is O. K., but when it was destroyed—it made me feel kind of 'oogy' like. Dunno as I liked *The Carnival of Death* as well as I liked Arlton Eadie's previous serial, *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*. *Lukundoo* revives the memory of Solomon Kane somehow. These African voodoo stories are the kind one reads with wide-eyed amazement—and was this amazing! Tickled to see that Jirel of Joiry is back with us, and *'bien'*—Jules de Grandin. *'Voilà'*—now we haf waat you call zee good issue—extry good."

Conan a Superman

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "I was greatly pleased with the stories in the December WT, but at the same time greatly disappointed with Mrs. Brundage's illustration of Conan. From Howard's stories I have always pictured Conan as a rough, muscular, scarred figure of giant stat-

NEXT MONTH

The Albino Deaths

By Ronal Kayser

WEIRD tortures took place in the ghastly cells of horror under the castle in the city where the Dictator lived. And in those dim confines lived albino mice and snakes, that watched with avid eyes as the hooded torturer plied his grim task. Yet the thrilling events of this story cannot be blamed on the Dictator.

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ure with thick, wiry, black hair covering his massive chest, powerful arms, and muscular legs; and a face that's as rugged as the weather-beaten face of an old sea captain. Virgil Finlay deserves a lot of praise for his splendid illustrations. *The Great Brain of Kaldar* by Hamilton gets my vote for first place. I thought that the invisible men would find a way to make Chan Merrick and company able to see them and their city; but they didn't. Maybe they will, if we get another Kaldar tale. The first part of Howard's *The Hour of the Dragon* is very exciting and I anxiously await the remaining installments."

Brief Briefs

Robert G. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "The December issue was a good one, even though it was five days late. The best stories were those by Hamilton and Howard. You can't print too many stories by those talented authors to suit me."

Morris Levine, of Berwyn, Maryland, writes: "I like your magazine a lot, and I think most of your stories are great. Seabury Quinn's stories particularly appeal to me."

James N. Mooney, of Westport, Connecticut, writes: "All your stories have been great, especially *The Six Sleepers* by Hamilton and *Once in a Thousand Years* by Middleton. Best luck for 1936."

Charles H. Bert, of Philadelphia, writes: "Nominations for reprints from your early issues: *The Abysmal Horror* by B. Wallis, a masterpiece about the end of the world; and *The Ghoul and the Corpse* by G. A. Wells, a goose-flesh story of the frozen north. Please publish those stories again."

S. Moss, of New York, writes: "Just read *When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed*, by Leslie F. Stone. I enjoyed every word of it. How does it happen that we have never read a story by this author in WEIRD before? I belong to a woman's club, each member of which is a science-fiction fan, and we all decided that we would like to see more of Leslie Stone's stories in WEIRD."

John Malone, of Jackson, Mississippi, writes: "I like *The Hedge* and *Lead Soldiers*. They are two of the best (if not the best) fillers that I have read this year. The reprint, *Lukundoo*, was just the thing. You've been giving us fine reprints."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, which stories do you like best in this issue? Fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page, or write a letter, and send it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. The most popular story in our December issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the first part of Robert E. Howard's stirring serial, *The Hour of the Dragon*. Second in popularity in that issue was Clark Ashton Smith's amazing tale of time turned back, *The Chain of Aforgomon*.

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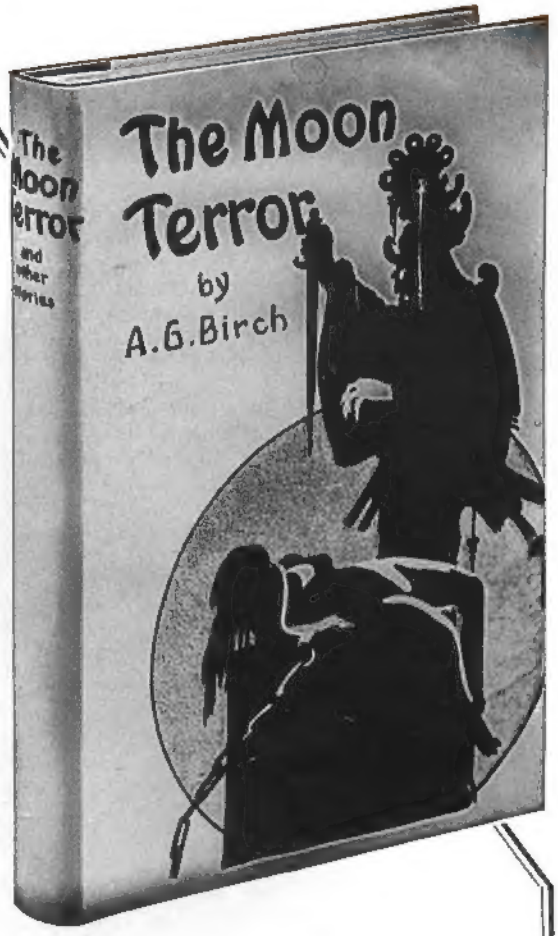

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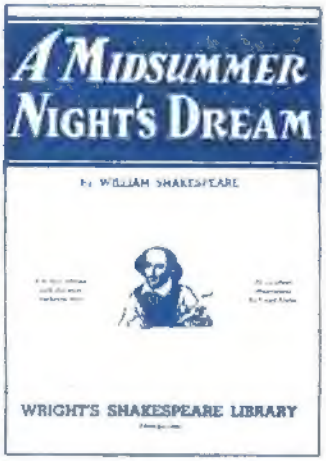

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